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Humidifying and unsticking old photos

The following example has been used in both disaster recovery and the organizing and digitizing of a household's family archives.

You open a box to find old rolled up photos, curled images that can't easily go through a scanner or stacks of photos in the original processing envelope that have stuck together. They are not lost for good, at least not all of them. You may have had a disaster at home, a broken pipe for example and they got wet.

To show you what we do, here is an example of how we preserved a family's military history stored for decades in a World War I Army trunk filled with old panoramic photos, documents, letters, records, and books. After assessing the collection, we began the cleaning, organizing and preservation process to enable everything to be scanned or photographed and then shared with the extended family.

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Needs Assessment

This trunk had been stored either in the basement of a private home, an attic or a storage unit in a senior residential facility that was damp and, unfortunately, home to many pests. At one point many items were put into large manila envelopes. We removed the items from the trunk and sealed them in plastic containers while it was being treated.

The contents of the trunk were valuable for both historical and sentimental reasons, as the veteran family member was a veterinarian assigned to one of the first organized Army medical regiments in the country. It contained military records, photos of annual inspections and gala events, letters of note, family photos and other family history records. All these items were of age between 70 and 100 years old. The most critical to restore were some 30 panoramic photos of military inspections and gala events that had always remained in their mail tubes. Everything was brittle or musty. Our objective is to restore the entire collection to be scanned, preserved, and shared with extended family.



The contents of the army trunk filled one 30-gallon plastic storage box.

Materials and Resources

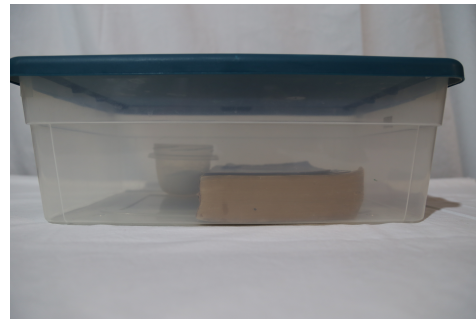
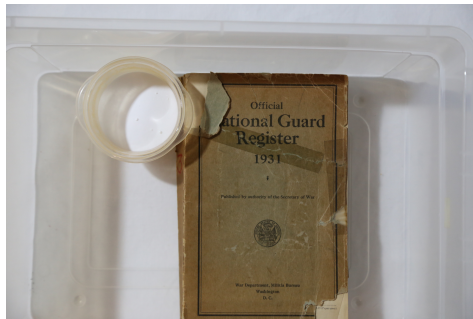
Reorganizing was critical to the preservation of these items. Rusty paper clips and unnecessary envelopes take up a lot of space. The family history records could be preserved in containers with other genealogical records. The remaining items were rehoused in acid-free archival boxes. We used the following:

- Portfolio Box 16" x 20" for panoramic photos
- Acid-free board stock, used as a separator and for a custom storage box for three larger photos
- Two 8" x 10" clamshell boxes to store books
- Two 8.5" x 11" proof boxes for photos
- Watertight Iris File Box for future storage
- Note: Three mailing tubs that once held photos were kept to be stored in another box, yet to be decided. They were sent to the veteran during different times when he held various military ranks. It dates the images.

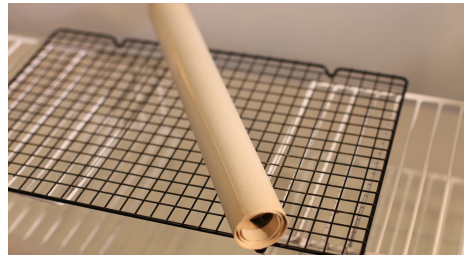


Time

This collection was part of a larger project to sort 30 large storage boxes filled with family records and photographs. This military trunk required about 20 hours of work over two weeks of time to complete. We had to humidify the panoramic images so they could be flattened and thus preserved. Below are a series of photos showing how we did that in a small space while still working on the other 30 boxes to be assessed. The scanning process is expected to require 15-20 hours, as most of the images need to be scanned on a flatbed scanner.



Musty smelling books were sealed in a plastic bin with baking soda for a day.
Further conservation may be necessary.



Each image took about a day to humidify and another day or two to flatten. We repeated the process if necessary.



Scanning

Scanning of photographs are done in both a tif and jpg formats at a minimum of 600 dpi. We advise clients to scan their images at 600 dpi, when possible, to accommodate the high resolutions of today's electronic screens. Some images will be scanned at a higher resolution - say 1200 to 2400 dpi - to benefit the photo restoration process. Documents will be scanned in pdf and tif formats. A second set of scans can also be done at a lower resolution for small projects and social media sharing.

Future Storage

Preserved family files need to breathe. In a needs assessment, however, most families can't provide temperature-controlled, long-term storage. Their biggest threats to an archive are broken pipes, fire, household pests, natural disaster, theft or disinterest (and thus someone throws it all out.) We suggest files be stored in a location that is away from the biggest threats. Sometimes we suggest that files be preserved in weathertight containers at home, to avoid the typical household pests that love to eat paper. By scanning images the family has the ability to share the archive with others, store it on the cloud, and maintain an external hard drive in a watertight and fireproof safe. The 3-2-1 Method of preservation dictates that a family makes three different copies of a collection on two different formats and one collection held offsite. This way, if something happens to your collection there is a backup available.

Quick reference - The biggest threats to most family photo collections in our area are typical household pests, such as silverfish; heat and humidity, which accelerate deterioration of your images; and broken pipes. Think attic and garage storage. Family arguments over old photos are always solved with scanning and duplication.

Privacy Policy

For your security and privacy, no client files will be maintained in perpetuity by Documented Legacy once the project is completed.

Documented Legacy is a mobile personal historian company that helps families and organizations preserve their history through recorded storytelling and the preservation of photo and document archives and heirlooms. The company is based in Mount Laurel, New Jersey.