Welcome to

How to Read a Photograph

A virtual program

Every photo tells a story....
But what is that story?

Hello, I'm
Erin Hicks

- *Specializes in museum education, local historical research, and artifact interpretation*
- *Background in art and design, especially passionate about the areas of local history where art and history intersect.*

Learning Goals

- Introduce concepts of basic visual literacy and historical thinking
- Demonstrate awareness of the photograph as a primary source, a visual document, and a physical artifact
- Build skills in observing details and exploring meanings
- Understand skills gained require a continual practice and should prompt further research

Also, we will be doing an exercise later so grab some paper now!

Why read photos?

Dear Library,
I am enclosing a mystery photo that was in my first cousin's belongings at her death. This photo has no date. I have no information at all about the date, time or place of the photo, nor the people in the photo. I don't know if the people on the left in the front, are my grandfather and grandmother.... Perhaps someone can help me track down at least some information and solve some of this mystery. Any help would be most appreciated.

Sincerely, Patron

At the Pennsylvania Room:
- Patron Inquiry
- Donations
- Collections Management

Object Entry and Registration

Accession Number: 0005

Item description: Black and white photograph of unidentified group of children and dog, undated

Location: Storage 2

...Because we love a good mystery!

I purchased a stack of photos at a local used bookstore, likely all reprints, all undated.

Merging visual literacy and historical thinking skills

SOCIETY OF American Archivists

visual literacy

n.

1. an understanding of the history, conventions, and technology of still and moving images and the ability to analyze and interpret them (Citations)

https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/visual-literacy.html

Historical thinking - a set of critical literacy skills for evaluating and analyzing primary source documents to construct a meaningful account of the past.

- Reading a photograph deals with **Historical Analysis and Interpretation**

Photograph as a primary source visual document

Strengths:

- Captures a moment in time in a visual medium
- Quickly and concisely informs about people, places, objects, and events
- Provides information that is difficult to convey through written formats (fashion, decor, art, etc.)
- Sometimes records details of everyday life of people that are not captured in written records
- Can evoke memories and/or emotions in the viewer

https://libguides.mnhs.org/photos/primary

Miles-Humes house moving, c.1897 (current home to the Centre County Library and Historical Museum, Pennsylvania Room)

Photograph as a primary source visual document

Weaknesses:

- People, place, date, and the name of the photographer are often not identified
- May reflect the bias or perspective of the photographer
- Photographs must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. Without context, a photo may be interesting but not informative.
- Photographs are taken for different purposes. Not all photographs were taken with documentary intent and some are heavily manipulated
- Many decades of photographs are in black-and-white or the color has faded and is no longer accurate

https://libguides.mnhs.org/photos/primary

Photo credit: Reddit user workingat7

Working through the process... *Grab a few sheets of paper for writing!*

How do I know this is true?

Avoid making assumptions, rather see what can be inferred.

For example, how do you know that a group of people is a family or even related?

Why was this photo taken?

Check any bias and frequently ask why?

For example, what determines the difference between successful homesteaders or struggling pioneers?

Remember! Asking open-ended questions with no right or wrong answers generally leads to more questions - *FUN!*

Looking for visual elements and subject matter

PEOPLE - Identify the people, one or a group, gender, age, relationship to each other. What are they wearing? Do they convey emotion?

PHOTOGRAPHER/STUDIO - Is one indicated?

TIME - What time of day is it? What season, year, period, or century?

ACTIVITIES & EVENTS - What are the people doing, what event is taking place?

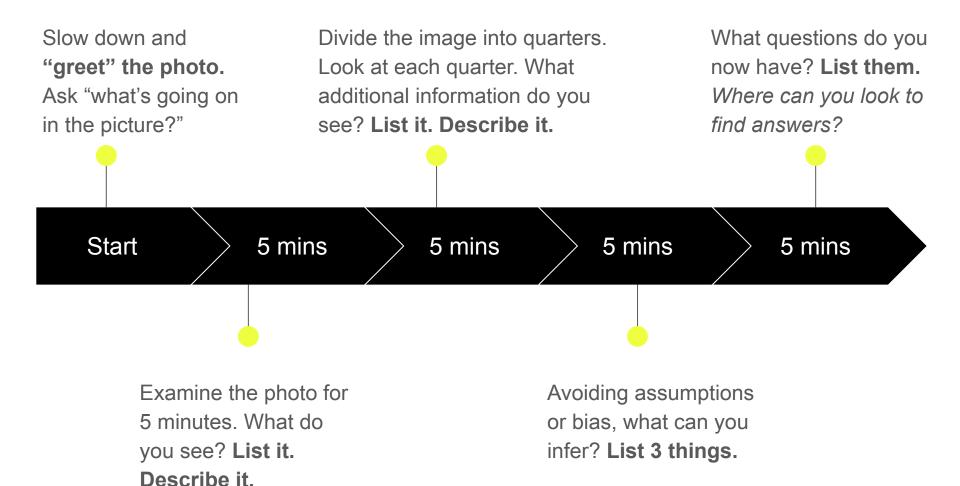**OBJECTS/ANIMALS/PLANTS** - Where can flora/fauna be found?

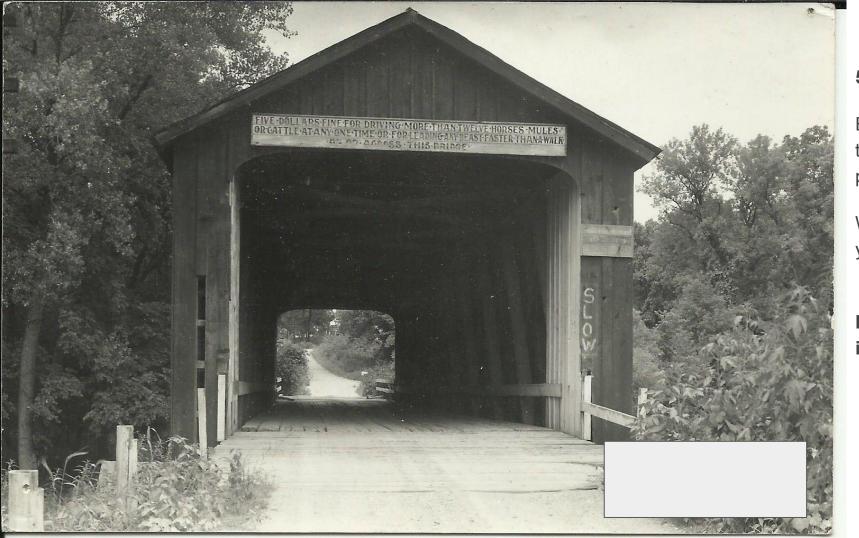**PLACE -** Are there recognizable landmarks or architecture? Is it rural or urban, indoor/outdoor?

PHOTO TITLE/CAPTION - Is one indicated?

In family portraiture, do you recognize:

- Family heirlooms?
- Furniture?
- Location?
- Family members?
  - Use a process of elimination, along with genealogy, to determine which family member it is or is not

Let's try it!

Slow down and **"greet" the photo.** Ask "what's going on in the picture?"

Divide the image into quarters. Look at each quarter. What additional information do you see? **List it. Describe it.**

What questions do you now have? **List them.** *Where can you look to find answers?*

| Start | 5 mins | 5 mins | 5 mins | 5 mins |

Examine the photo for 5 minutes. What do you see? **List it. Describe it.**

Avoiding assumptions or bias, what can you infer? **List 3 things.**

Text visible on the bridge in the photo:

FIVE·DOLLARS·FINE·FOR·DRIVING·MORE·THAN·TWELVE·HORSES·MULES·
OR·CATTLE·AT·ANY·ONE·TIME·OR·FOR·LEADING·ANY·BEAST·FASTER·THAN·A·WALK·
ON·OR·ACROSS·THIS·BRIDGE·

SLOW

5 mins.

Examine the the photo.

What do you see?

List it. Describe it.

FIVE DOLLARS FINE FOR DRIVING MORE THAN TWELVE HORSES MULES
OR CATTLE AT ANY ONE TIME OR FOR LEADING ANY BEAST FASTER THAN A WALK
ON OR ACROSS THIS BRIDGE

SLOW

THE OLD RED
COVERED BRIDGE
PRINCETON, ILL.
L-123
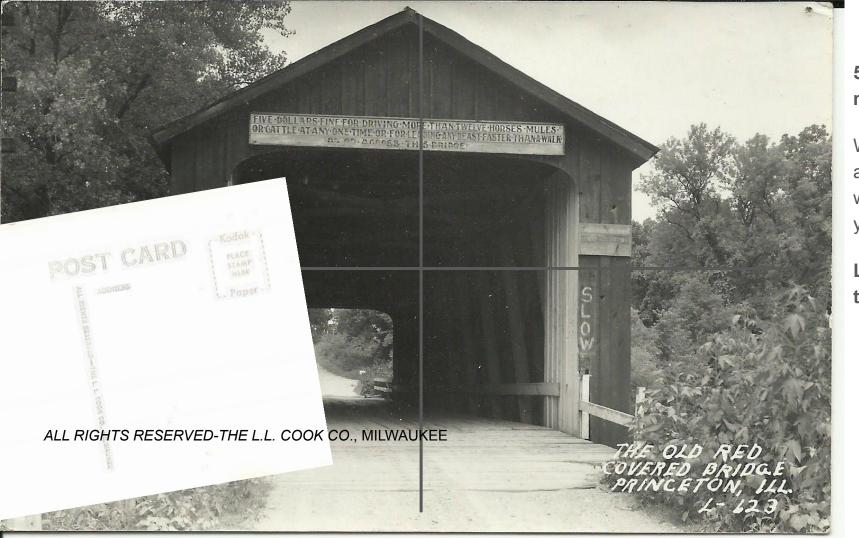
5 more mins.

Look at each quarter.

What additional information do you see?

List it. Describe it.

5 more mins.

Without assuming, what can you infer?

List 3 things.

FIVE·DOLLARS·FINE·FOR·DRIVING·MORE·THAN·TWELVE·HORSES·MULES·
OR·CATTLE·AT·ANY·ONE·TIME·OR·FOR·LEADING·ANY·BEAST·FASTER·THAN·A·WALK·
ON·OR·ACROSS·THIS·BRIDGE·

SLOW

THE OLD RED
COVERED BRIDGE
PRINCETON, ILL.
L-123

POST CARD

ADDRESS

Kodak
PLACE
STAMP
HERE
Paper

FIVE·DOLLARS·FINE·FOR·DRIVING·MORE·THAN·TWELVE·HORSES·MULES·
OR·CATTLE·AT·ANY·ONE·TIME·OR·FOR·LEADING·ANY·BEAST·FASTER·THAN·A·WALK·
ON·OR·ACROSS·THIS·BRIDGE·

SLOW

THE OLD RED
COVERED BRIDGE
PRINCETON, ILL.
L-123

Last 5 mins.

What questions do you now have?

List them.

Where can you look to find answers?

Comparing with other photos

Finding and visiting in person

Personal photo taken May 27, 2015

Memories of a sketching trip

Personal photo taken May 27, 2015

Personal sketch, c. 1985

Further resources and homework

- Use genealogical research to help you infer and deduce within your own collection of family photographs
- Research hair and clothing styles to recognize a time period
- Research the methods used by Historic Preservationists regarding architecture and landscapes
- Research Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) that uses art to facilitate visual literacy skills by asking three basic questions: *What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?*

- Research visual vocabulary of art, also used within photographs (ie: balance, composition, focus, and perspective)
- Research the history and technological advances in the history of photography
- Research the types of photographs to better determine a date range

Identifying photograph type and dating

Daguerreotypes (1839-1860) can be identified by a silver mirror finish where the image can be seen or not seen depending on reflection.

Ambrotypes (1850s-1860s) are a positive on glass with black background added in order to contrast.

Tintypes (1850s-Early 1900s) more properly known as ferrotypes, are a positive on iron.

Albumen prints (1850-1895) Are two layer photographs on paper that may be glossy with purplish brown to chocolate brown colors; 80% of 19th century photographs on paper are of this type.

Lear, M. (2020, January 21). How to Identify and Care for Photographs, *Compendium*.

Salted paper prints (1839-1860s) are single layer prints comprised of uncoated paper with a silver image deposited in the fibers; paper fibers will be clearly visible.

Platinum prints (1873 -1930s) are single layer prints comprised of platinum or palladium embedded in uncoated fibers; the surface is matte with no gloss, fading, or silvering

Cyanotype prints (1872-1950s) are characteristically blue in tone, typically with poor contrast and sharpness.

Gelatin silver prints (1874-present) comprise the bulk of 20th century black and white images and are often gold toned, shifting the image to red-violet or dark black-violet.

Tips for care and handling of photographs

When writing on the reverse side of photos, use a soft graphite pencil (6B)

Use nitrile gloves when handling photographs and do not touch photos on the face of the image

Handle photos mounted on board with both hands and do not pick up by the corners

Do not use mending tape, rubber bands, paper clips, or staples to attach or repair photos

Do not attempt to remove an image mounted on board as it may destroy the photo

NEVER remove encased photographs such as daguerreotypes, ambrotypes or tintypes from their protective cases or attempt to clean them

Miles-Humes house, 1940. CCL&HM Photo Collection

Lear, M. (2020, January 21). How to Identify and Care for Photographs, *Compendium*.

Sources

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National Park Service Teaching with Museum Collections

Thank you for joining!

Questions?

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The Pennsylvania Room & Historical Museum

Visit our website for updates regarding reopening

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