



An Archivist's Tips to Reading and Identifying Historic Photographs
Mark G. Thiel, CA (Certified Archivist), Archivist

When attempting to read unidentified photographs, first ask these crucial questions: Who (and by whom), what, where, when, and why. Who or what is the subject? Who captured the image? Where was it taken? When was it taken? Why was it taken?

Basic Analysis

Principal Subjects

Who or what are the notable subjects (objects) within the image? Are they people, animals, and/or natural or man-made? What relationships exist between these "subjects"? Does a consistency exist between them?

Photographer

Is the photographer known? Was the photographer notable? Is a biographical statement available, either in print or online? Is the photographer's location listed in a directory? How do the years of the photographer's career correlate with this image? How do the locations where the photographer practiced correlate with this image? Was the photographer known for capturing scenes of a specific type or style? Did the photographer capture candid or contrived scenes?

Place

Is the location of the image known? If not, examine the image for internal clues. Is the portrayal of objects consistent with the scene? Does the dress of the subjects' dress correspond correctly with the scene? If the photographer is known, is this location consistent with that of the photographer's other work?

Date

Is the date of the image known? If not, but if the photographer is known, what is the probable date range when it might have been taken? Do the objects and/or activities portrayed suggest an event with a known date?

If the image has been published as an illustration, what is the date and title of the publication? Turnaround times between image capture and publication may vary from

hours to years. Does the corresponding text provide additional information about the image?

Many details found in photographs are associated with specific eras and places. Mass-produced objects and styles from mass-culture have known years when they were generally used, although change in underdeveloped areas may lag. Photographic technology and techniques also provide dating clues. Kerosene lanterns in U.S. photographs generally date pictures to before the 1930s when many rural areas became electrified and electric light fixtures replaced kerosene ones (row one, left). In the United States, horse-drawn vehicles were common in urban areas to the 1910s (row two, left) and rural underdeveloped areas to the 1950s. Popular clothing and hair styles varied by decade (row one, right and left; row three, center and right). Before the 1920s, subjects were required to hold themselves perfectly still to prevent blurring their image as camera shutter speeds were slow (row one, left). Brown toning was common was common between 1900s and 1930s (row one, left, center and right, and row two, left). Date clues in images, e.g. annual public events (row two, left), calendars, and knowing key dates in the lives of subjects, e.g. births, deaths, school enrollment, occupations, all contribute to the dating of images. Ethnic and geographic features tend to be associated with specific areas. Adobe architecture, arid landscape, Pueblo Indian hair style and the Zuni Pueblo ceramic styles suggest Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico (row one, left and center). The people in the background suggest a locality in the Arab World and the United States flag held by the group suggests that they are U.S. citizens. The photographer's stamp and caption on the backside of the original print identifies the building and location as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (row one, right).

Row One:

Left: Unidentified woman, Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico, no date (ca. 1905 – 1910).

Center: Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico, no date (ca. 1905 – 1910).

Right: Osage Indian tourists and Archbishop Albert T. Daeger, O.F.M., with U.S. flag at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem. Although not dated, presumably this delegation visited between 1920 and 1932, when the Osage people became uniquely prosperous due to the discovery of oil on their reservation in Oklahoma and the death of Archbishop Daeger.

Marquette Archives, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Digital Image Collection, 11613 (left), 11611 (center) and 10761 (right).

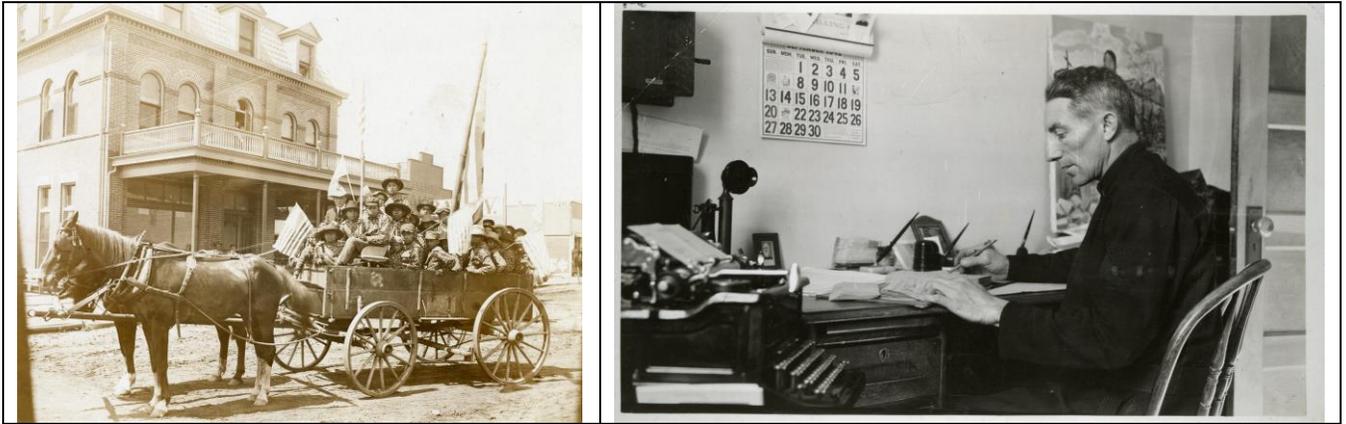


Row Two:

Left: Students from St. Patrick's School, Anadarko, Oklahoma, in Fourth of July parade, 1903.

Right: Br. Bill Siehr, S.J., by monthly wall calendar displaying the page for September, 1942.

Marquette Archives, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Digital Image Collection, 11472 (left) and Holy Rosary Mission – Red Cloud Indian School Digital Image Collection, MUA_HRC_RCIS_00346 (right).



Row Three:

Left: Black Elk at Duhamel's Indian Pageant, Black Hills, South Dakota, by W. Ben Hunt, 1937. Hunt (1887-1970) was an internationally prominent author of DIY books on American Indian arts and crafts from Hales Corners, Wisconsin.

Center: Black Elk in the first row far right wearing glasses and holding a book, St. Elizabeth's Mission, Oglala, South Dakota, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation by Joseph A. Zimmerman, S.J., 1936.

Right: Gertrude Simmons Bonnin as a speaker at the Catholic Sioux Congress, Holy Rosary Mission, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, 1920.

Marquette Archives, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Digital Image Collection, 01287 (left), 00657 (center), and Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records, Series 09-1, no number (right).



Row Four:

Left: Stephen Standing Bear, ca. 1930, published in The Indian Sentinel, 28:8 (October, 1948): front cover, which credits Rev. Joseph A. Zimmerman, S.J., as the photographer without including biographical information on Standing Bear who died years before this picture was published.

Center: Wedding party of Jim Thorpe and Margaret Miller, St. Patrick's Church, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1913, published in The Indian Sentinel, 1914:21.

Right: Kiowa Indian fancy dancer Dixon Palmer, St. Patrick's Mission School, Anadarko, Oklahoma, 1937?, by Fr. John B. Tenny, S.S., photographer, publisher of The Indian Sentinel and director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. Marquette Archives, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Digital Image Collection, 00737 (left), (center) and 00452 (right).



Popular culture icons, such as dancers and athletes, are well-documented with illustrations in 20th century print publications. Wild-west shows popularized Indian dancing during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Nicholas Black Elk (row three, left) (1866-1950) and Stephen Standing Bear (row four, left) became stars who danced professionally in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and in so doing, they toured Europe and remained popular subjects of photography when wearing beaded buckskin regalia. In Vienna, Standing Bear was hospitalized and there he met his future wife who later made his regalia (row four, left). Jim Thorpe (row four, center) is regarded as the most accomplished athlete of the first half of the 20th century. Dixon Palmer (row four, right) was a Kiowa Indian who danced as a fancy dancer and attended St. Patrick's School in Anadarko, Oklahoma.

Black Elk (row three, left) is best known as a mystical spiritual leader from the book Black Elk Speaks, first published in 1932. He was an Oglala Indian spiritual leader who became first a wild-west show dancer, then a Catholic catechist and later the master of ceremonies of a Black Hills tourist pageant near Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. Today, depictions of him in regalia remain more popular than ones reflecting some of his intellectual achievements (row three, center). Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (row three, right) or Zitkala-Sa or Red Bird (1876-1938) was a prominent early 20th century activist for Native American civil rights. For credibility, she wore buckskin dresses when speaking to audiences of non-Native Americans, but when speaking to Native Americans, she wore conventional American dress.

Showing facial expressions in photographs, such as smiling, represents learned behavior. During the 1920s, shutter speeds increased on new cameras, and some people began to smile for viewers (row four, center). Presumably with prompting in some instances, other subjects began to smile as well (row four, right).

Advanced Analysis

Messages in Pictures

Oftentimes pictures of people are the product of efforts by the subjects, the photographer, and sometimes third parties not among the subjects. What message do they convey to the reader? In short, determine whether the pictures are **candid** or **staged**.

Examine the picture for internal clues. Are the objects portrayed **consistent** with the setting? Does the dress of the wearer correspond correctly with the person? Did the photographer have a history of capturing candid or contrived scenes? Did the subject typically wear this attire every day or only for special events? If for special events, did the subject wear this attire for some audiences but not others? Did a third-party, neither the subject nor the photographer, influence the picture? Many early 20th century photographs of Native Americans wearing beaded buckskin dress with feather regalia were staged specifically for non-Native viewers.

Dress Styles

Use comparisons to identify eras and affiliations with athletic, ethnic, military, occupational, scholastic, social, and religious groups. Examples are available in the online Marquette and Smithsonian online collections noted by the following visual categories.

- Ethnic – African Americans (United States): **Postcards from Manhattan: The Portrait Photography of Carl Van Vechten, Ralph Metcalfe: The Olympic Years 1932-1936**, [SIRIS Archives, Manuscripts, Photographs Catalog](#)
- Ethnic – Hispanic Americans (all Americas): [SIRIS Archives, Manuscripts, Photographs Catalog](#)
- Ethnic – Native Americans (United States plus elsewhere, if noted): **Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Holy Rosary Mission—Red Cloud Indian School, St. Francis Mission, *The Indian Sentinel*, 1902-1962**; [SIRIS Archives, Manuscripts, Photographs Catalog](#) (all Americas). During the transition to wearing Euro-American clothing for daily use, moccasins were one of the last pieces of distinctive clothing surrendered by Native Americans. This provides a clue for identifying tribal affiliation in certain photographs, but not all Indians wore moccasins from styles associated with their group.
- Popular mass-culture (United States): **Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Clement J. Zablocki: Photographs of Wisconsin's "Mr. Democrat", Holy Rosary Mission—Red Cloud Indian School, St. Francis Mission, *The Indian Sentinel*, 1902-1962, The Tommy G. Thompson Collection**, [SIRIS Archives, Manuscripts, Photographs Catalog](#)
- Religious dress – Catholic (worldwide): **Alfred Hamy's Jesuit Portrait Gallery, Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions The Hilltop Yearbooks, Holy Rosary Mission—Red Cloud Indian School, St. Francis Mission, *The Indian Sentinel*, 1902-1962**
- Uniforms – military, schools, and sports (United States): **Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, Clement J. Zablocki: Photographs of Wisconsin's "Mr. Democrat", Holy Rosary Mission—Red Cloud Indian School, Ralph Metcalfe: The Olympic Years**

1932-1936, The Hall of Fame Collection, The Hilltop Yearbooks, *The Indian Sentinel*, 1902-1962, [SIRIS Archives, Manuscripts, Photographs Catalog](#)

Interpreting Color in Black and White Images

Color is obvious in some objects and not in others. Some subjects contain diverse and complex color combinations and their interpretation may unlock important clues, such as tribal affiliation for Native American subjects. Color may be the key to identifying unique but known objects in museum collections. For more information, see **[Identifying Colors and Ethnicity in Black and White Images](#)**.

The Archivist

Since 1986, Mark G. Thiel, CA (Certified Archivist) has administered the Catholic Native American special collections in the Marquette Archives, which include the records of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (U.S.) and over 50 other collections, the bulk of which date from the 19th century and comprise over 800 cubic feet of records with thousands of historical photographs.

Last updated December 5, 2011