

Daily Union Article  
Saturday, April 29, 2017  
Title: Preserving Our Past

My mom is turning 85 this year and wants to go through our family pictures before she loses her ability to remember names and faces. Although her body is struggling, her mind is sharp and I appreciate the effort she will take in making sure I know our family's heritage and ancestry.

Some of the pictures are approaching 100 years old, so we need to be careful how we handle them. The U.S. National Archives offers a wide variety of tips for preserving family heirlooms, pictures, and papers.

When mom and I work through her boxes of papers and photographs, these tips will come in handy:

- Prepare a clean, clear space to place the originals on before you get them out.
- Don't eat, drink, or smoke around the originals.
- Wash hands before handling paper and don't apply lotion as it can stain paper. Paper can be handled without gloves because clean, lotion-free hands will not stain the paper and gloves can make it hard to handle delicate paper.
- Handle photographs and negatives with gloves. Fingerprints can cause permanent stains on photographs and negatives.

Right now, our family photographs and papers are stored in plastic storage totes in a rather haphazard fashion. We need to get them organized and stored in a manner that will endure the test of time:

- Store in a container that is big enough for the originals to lay flat or upright without folding or bending.
- Appropriate size for the items being stored so they don't shift when moved. We will need to use spacer boards if we don't have enough items to fill the box and we need to make sure we don't overstuff the box, either.
- We need to get them out of the plastic totes and placed in boxes made of board or folder stock that is lignin-free and acid-free or buffered. We're shopping around for archival quality storage boxes that are durable enough to stack – mom has a lot of pictures!!!

Using a box rather than the plastic totes will allow a snugger fit, provide for air circulation, control acidity, restrict exposure to light, and adjust for changes in temperature and humidity.

To best preserve pictures and papers, we need store them in a low temperature, low humidity environment.

The lower the temperature in the storage area, the longer keepsakes will last. Cooler temperatures help slow the rate of chemical decay and reduce insect activity. It is best to keep the storage boxes in temperatures below 75°F.

The relative humidity should ideally be under 65% to prevent mold growth and reduce insect activity. However, damage will occur if the humidity is too low. Keep the humidity above 15% to prevent brittleness. Avoid storing your pictures and papers in the basement or attic. These areas lend themselves to significant variances in moisture and heat that will damage your keepsakes.

There are more than just pictures and papers in our family collection. The family bible, written in German and passed down from the early 1800's made it across the Atlantic, over the prairie, and into our hands. The years and modes of transportation have not been kind to it but is a treasured family heirloom.

My research tells me that a custom-made clamshell box is the best choice for storing our family bible. There are a variety of companies that sell customized boxes but you want to make sure you measure your items carefully to get the right fit. Measure in three places each across the width, length, and depth of the book. Sometimes the binding will remain taller or the corners may stick up a bit from the pages so use the tallest measurement for each part of the bible.

Recent reports indicate that keeping family heirlooms is not as important to people as it once was. Perhaps people feel weighed down by the responsibility of caring for them, or simply don't know what to do with them. It's not uncommon for heirlooms to become a source of contention in a family.

One way to tackle this challenge is to create a single storage box of heirlooms for each person in the family. This reduces the clutter in the parent/grandparents house while minimizing the burden for storage space in the younger generations' homes.

For each keepsake you stash in the heirloom box, Sharon DeBartolo Carmack of Family Tree Magazine suggests you make a note of:

- How it came into your possession
- Who owned it originally
- When it was made
- What family stories are associated with the heirloom

To help you with managing keepsakes, there are some really handy resources you can access free from the Family Tree Magazine website at:

<http://www.familytreemagazine.com/info/oralhistoryforms>

Our family represents both our connection to the past generations and our future generations. Passing down keepsakes such as photos and papers are a great way to help us stay rooted in who we are and how we have arrived to where we are. Take some time to learn all you can about your family's journey – it can help you better appreciate where you are at today. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!