

Every Picture Tells a Story



Nannie Storts Moremen, taken circa 1885

Photographs are an important and common part of our lives. They capture important events and memories. A century ago, having your picture taken was a rare and special occasion. People often wore their best clothes and posed with serious faces, like Nannie Storts Moremen in the photo above. Photographs are great because they allow you to look into the eyes of people who lived long ago. But pictures are also important for another reason.

You might have heard the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words". What that means is that pictures give you lots of information. Sometimes they provide details you would not have known without the image. Sometimes they give you information about people who did not or could not leave behind any other kind of record.

For modern historians and researchers, photographs can be an important source of information and details. History detectives use two kinds of sources or clues to find out about the past.

1. Primary sources-these are anything that comes from the time period we are studying.

Examples: Letters, diaries, newspapers, artifacts, oral histories, legal/court documents and pictures.

2. Secondary sources-these are anything written about the time period.
Examples: Books, articles, blogs, wiki posts.

Photographs are a great primary source because they give you a "snapshot" of the past. Moments from long ago, frozen in time. History detectives must ask themselves lots of questions in order to understand the clues we find. Questions like...

- What does this photograph tell me?
- Why did the photographer take the picture?
- Is it a fair and accurate portrait of the past?

Find an old photo, either of your family or find one online that interests you. On a piece of paper, answer the following questions:

- What is your first impression of the photo? What seems to be happening in the picture?
- How would you describe the people (their age, clothing, expression, relationship, economic status)?
- Make a list of the objects in the picture. Make another list of the kinds of technology that people have or do not have (by today's standards....do they have cell phones etc.)
- When do you think the picture was taken (year, time of day)? Where was it taken? How can you tell?
- Why do you think the photo was taken? Was it a special occasion?
- What does the picture tell you about the past?
- What objects in the picture have survived to our time?
- What questions do you have about the photograph?
- How could you get more information about the photograph and the time period it was taken?

These are just some of the skills used by History Detectives at Riverside!