

Digital Preservation

Imagine your children coming to get you because they found a dusty box with unusual looking, hollow cylinders inside. You look at it and explain that they belonged to your great-grandparents; that these cylinders were invented by a man named Edison and were the first type of musical records. People could even record their voice on it, you tell them. Unfortunately, as you go on to say, the machine that plays them is no longer around and can only be found in an antique shop, so they cannot hear what is on them.

Now fast forward in time and imagine that your great great grandchildren come running into their mother because they found a dusty box with unusual flat discs in them. Their mother explains that the discs belonged to you, her great grandparents. That they were called compact discs and had music, pictures, and information on them. Unfortunately, as she tells them, the machine that reads them is no longer around. Even antique shops don't have them! So sadly she explains that they will not be able to see the pictures on the disc that has "Vacation 2004" written on it.

The message here should be clear, don't only rely on digital media to preserve your memories. Hard drives can crash or the equipment (and maybe the software) to read media such as CDs can become antiquated. Remember the early 5.25" floppy disks? Try to read one today.

Here are some suggestions:

- Review your digital photos and print out the best ones, i.e. the "keepers", on photo grade paper of the same brand as your printer. Store them like you would any photo – in an archival album or storage box (for more info, see our article on "Photo Preservation").
- Do back up your digital pictures on CD-R or DVD-R in case you have a hard drive crash. Use top quality CDs to get the best life. No one knows for sure how long CDs will last as they are a recent innovation. However, accelerated aging tests would suggest that 100 years is possible if stored in the dark in moderate conditions. But will anybody a hundred years from now have a CD drive to read it?
- Did you know that JPEG files lose image quality every time they are opened, edited, and saved? If you want to do a lot of editing, either work on a copy, or save it in the TIFF format, which does not experience this loss. However, opening or displaying a JPEG image does not harm it in any way. Nor does renaming a JPEG cause any image quality loss,
- Keep up on storage media changes. As CDs go the way of floppy discs, and they will, you will need to re-save your images on the new media.

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- Consider using an on-line photo album service as a back-up option if you do not have a CD writer.
- Continue to use film photography, in addition to digital, for important events. While home printers and inks have vastly improved, a professionally finished picture will last longer. Photo paper and dyes used by your film processor are designed for long lasting color retention.

As in all your family heritage preservation activities, think long term and make sure your descendents will be able to see them.

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