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Archival Scanning Tips

I've spent a lot of time scanning (and re-scanning) old photographs over the years, both to share them with other people and to preserve them for the future. The tips below are the ones that work for me to capture and manage reasonably archival scanned images.

1. **Capture whatever image you can.** The tips below are geared to getting a scan that will preserve as much information from the image as possible, but even an imperfect scan or a photo of the image will capture some information. Doing the best you can under whatever circumstances you're in is worth your time.

2. **Know your scanner and your scanning software.** Taking the time to read through the documentation for your scanner and the software you're using will serve you well, and taking a few minutes to set default scanning settings will save you time in the long run.

3. **Keep your scanner clean**. Any flaws or dust on the glass of your scanner will be captured in your scans. It's a good idea to keep a couple of microfiber or cotton cloths on hand to dust or clean as needed—the wood fibers in tissue can cause small scratches on glass.

4. **Consider your scanning resolution.** You need to balance capturing the information in your image with file size. You'll lose some information if you scan at too low a resolution, but excessively large files deplete your storage space and become difficult to manage and share.

   I find 600 dots per inch (dpi) works well for me as a basic resolution setting for scanning prints. While some experts argue that scanning a normal-size print at a resolution above 300 dpi or so doesn't capture any more detail about the image, and may highlight flaws in the physical photograph such as scratches, I feel that scans at 600 dpi are richer and yet still manageable as JPEG files. Scanning at 600 dpi also allows you to make a fairly large print or print only a portion of the original image if you'd like.

   If I'm scanning a small print, a slide, or a small-format negative, I bump the dpi up a bit. If I'm scanning written information on the back of a photograph, or a document, I go down to 300 dpi.

5. **Consider file compression.** I'm a big fan of easily-portable JPEG files, but part of what makes them so convenient is that they're compressed, which means you lose detail in your image. If you have the storage space, I'd recommend scanning your pictures as TIFF files and making JPEG copies to edit and share. The TIFF files are huge, but if you have a relatively modern computer you probably do have the processor power and storage space to manage them.

6. **Scan in color, even if you're scanning a black-and-white original.** This will ensure you capture all the information that your original has to offer. You can always save a black-and-white copy of your color scan if you want a "clean" black-and-white image.

7. **Scan your entire original, including any margins.** I like my reference scans to include the entirety of the original object. Scanning the margins also ensures that you get every single bit of the central image in your scan.

8. **Scan the back of the picture if it isn't blank.** For me, this is any information at all, even if it's just a printed number from the photo developer; I err on the side of caution when it comes to information.

9. **Keep a reference copy of your initial scan.** If the original is damaged or faded, you'll probably want to make some edits to the scan. There's nothing wrong with that, but it does add information that wasn't in the original. Keeping a reference copy is a good practice, as it preserves a record of the original object in case it is later lost—and it's also handy if you decide later that you don't like the edits you made and want to try again.

10. **Decide on a system for naming your files.** If you scan very many of the pictures you have on hand, you'll end up with a whole lot of files. I use the very simple system my father, who spent a good portion of his career managing records, suggested: I number each file sequentially, and keep a separate list to match those file numbers with notes about the images. When I make copies to edit, I add a letter at the end of the file name (e.g., an edited copy of 000001.jpeg would become 000001a.jpeg), so that it's clear that all the copies are edits of the same scan. For scans of the backs of photographs, I use the same number as the front image but use "v" for "verso"; you could also add the word "back."

11. **Add metadata to your image file.** Adding information to the metadata for an image file is the electronic equivalent of labeling the back of a photograph. You can use a metadata editor or photo organizational software to add information, but it's also easy to do right in your file explorer. If you search for "edit image metadata" you'll find up-to-date instructions for the operating system you're using. The most efficient approach is to add information right after you scan the picture, ,so that it will be included with any copies you make.

    In the tags field, I add a tag for each person in the picture, using the same convention I use for my family history files: the individual's full name at birth and birthdate. If I know the location of the picture, I add that as well. I may also include a tag to help me identify the image as part of a series of pictures (e.g., "Big Snow 1916"). The system will autosuggest tags as you type, which helps ensure your tags stay consistent.

    In the author field, I add my name and email address. In the title field, I add a title for the picture that identifies each individual, the location, and the approximate date the picture was taken, using the names that would have been current at the time it was taken. In the comments field, I add information about any alterations I made to the image after scanning.