



Finding Homes for Your Orphan

by Megan Smolenyak

Photos



Who among us doesn't have a few mystery photos stashed away in a closet or old scrapbook somewhere? And how many of us have winced to find some family's treasured photos for sale in an antique store or flea market? As more of us immerse ourselves in family history, it's not surprising that we are discovering stashes of these photos in our own possession. Others of us may be dismayed to learn about the collection of family photos that a distant cousin sold in an estate sale five years ago, wishing we could get a look at those missing treasures. I call these unidentified and wandering pictures "orphan photos."

In recent years, there's been a groundswell of people interested in reuniting stray pictures with their families of origin (or at least, with someone with a genuine connection and interest). These casual detectives acquire photos that have nothing to do with their own families, and find a way to get them back into the right hands.

Fortunately for all of us, the Internet is providing a growing set of tools for these mystery-solvers and now

each of us can help out. A little Web surfing reveals a crop of sites that will allow you to share your own photos and to search through other photos that are homeless.

Before you begin, though, there are a few factors you'll want to consider.

Before You Submit

A relatively recent development in the world of orphan photos has been the introduction of mostly self-serve, online photo databases that allow the user to upload his or her personal photo collection. These sites provide a set of instructions to guide the user through the process of submitting a photo and accompanying text data (usually names, places, and approximate date), which enable visitors to search for and locate photos of interest. Such sites naturally assume that the user has a scanner or other means of digitizing the photos.

While exploring the following Web sites, I tried not only to search on various names and places, but also to upload several mystery photos of my own. Doing so



revealed that not all sites operate the same way. A few important variables include:

- File formats
- Maximum file size
- Means of submission (e.g., self-serve, e-mail to webmaster, hard copy to webmaster, etc.)
- Timeframe before photo appears online
- Legal agreements

If your approach is to submit your photo to as many sites as possible to maximize your chances of a distant cousin spotting it, you will want to save your image as a .jpg file. Every site I tested accepted this format, and only a few accepted alternatives. (The second most welcome file format is .gif.) Also, while I managed to upload files as large as 300KB, some sites requested that file size be kept as low as 35KB.

True photobases are designed to encourage self-serve uploading, but other searchable photo sites are intentionally centralized so that all content is sent to and subsequently posted by the webmaster. Even on the self-serve sites, you won't necessarily see your contribution immediately. Regrettably, a couple of sites that were formally on "auto-pilot" are now screened, due to inappropriate content being uploaded in

the past. In such cases,

your photo will generally appear within a day following submission.

You will also want to consider whether you are willing to let others use your photo, even for noncommercial purposes. While no Web site insists on exclusive rights or asks you to give up your own rights, several expect you to allow them to use submitted photos in exchange for posting them for you. Typical wording is:

"By submitting any material, including photographs and accompanying text, you thereby automatically grant (or warrant that the owner of such rights has expressly granted) an irrevocable, royalty-free, non-exclusive, transferable, and universal right and license to use and display the said submitted material in conjunction with this site without compensation to you. You also

grant others to download and use the photos for their own private use, including but not limited to personal genealogical research."

If you've decided that you're willing to share the rights to your photos and you've scanned them into a .jpg format of reasonable size, here's a sampling of the sites you may want to visit.

Self-Serve Photobases

The sites discussed here are general purpose sites that accept old photos of all kinds. It should be noted, though, that there are also specialized photobases such as Genealogy.com's Virtual Cemetery of tombstone photos at <www.genealogy.com/vcem_welcome.html>.

Ancient Faces (www.ancientfaces.com)

This site provides easy uploading of family, military, and mystery photos. Over 8,000 photos portraying more than 11,000 people are already searchable by name or place. To search all the categories at the same time, choose the "all sections" option at the top of the home page.

The uploading process is quick and you'll have the pleasure of seeing your photo almost immediately. Registering with Ancient Faces will allow you to edit your submissions at a later date. Appealing extras include the ability to e-mail others when you upload a photo, or to arrange to be notified when new photos are uploaded for the names you're seeking.



Image Submission Guidelines

Formats Accepted	Maximum Size	Means of Submission	Time Until Image Appears
Ancient Faces jpg or .gif; others via e-mail	100 kb	self-serve upload; can e-mail photos in other formats	immediate; searchable within 24 hours
Dead Fred jpg only	images scanned at 72 dpi	self-serve upload; U.S. mail	site says within 3-5 days, but some appear within hours
GeneaNet jpg or .gif	100 kb	self-serve upload	immediate
Ancestor Photo Genealogy Archive jpg 60 kb	e-mail	several hours to 1 week	N/A
Photographs from the Past prefers .jpg, but sometimes accepts other formats	images scanned at 100 dpi or less	e-mail; U.S. mail	a couple of days to 1 week
Lost Leaves Photos jpg or .tif	150 kb	e-mail; U.S. mail	N/A



Dead Fred's Genealogy Photo Archive (www.deadfred.com)

The colorfully named Dead Fred Web site focuses on pre-1960 photos and contains over 10,000 images representing about 4,000 surnames. To thoroughly search the site, you'll want to search under the "Search Now" and "Mysteries" options of the Photo Archive. Searchable fields include last name, first name, state, town, country, photographer, and photographer's state.

Photos can be submitted online or through the mail, but all photos sent through the mail are considered donations and become the sole property of Dead Fred's Genealogy Photo Archive. (Exceptions can be arranged.) The site notes that "all digitally contributed photographs and relating information are owned by the actual contributors, not the Archive."

If you choose to submit online, your photos will usually appear within a day. Searchers who think they might have a connection to you may obtain your e-mail address from DeadFred, with your approval. The site also houses a lost-and-found message board called "Pick and Shovel" and offers a monthly newsletter that includes all recently added surnames, as well as other articles and photos of interest.

GeneaNet (www.geneanet.org)

GeneaNet, the largest genealogical database in Europe, functions primarily as a hub to other Web sites with desired data or images (some 48 million entries involving 150 million individuals). The site also allows users to upload images directly through its separate portraits and postcards databases.

While representing just a fraction of its content, there are more than 1,400 photos in the portraits database and almost 5,000 images in the postcard database. Users are also encouraged to help identify mystery images at <http://portraits.geneanet.org>. The main index of 48 million should be included in your search, as entries there may direct you to sites with photos of interest to you.

Not surprisingly, this Web site is heavy on French and other European content, but all users are encouraged to search the site or upload their own references and images. Those users wishing to upload must register, but images will appear instantly. Searches can be done by family name, year ranges, town, region, country, and other options, but may require a little patience since European structure is used. Entries for the state of Ohio, for instance, were found when the abbreviation "Ohi" was entered in the

region code field. Plan on experimenting for a few minutes to become accustomed to the system, especially if you want to search by location.

Other Photo Collection Sites

Several photo collection Web sites have come online when an individual decides to share old pictures he or she has rescued. By posting them on the Internet, such webmasters serve as something of a middleman, hoping to restore photos to family members. After sharing their own collection, these volunteers often offer to upload others' mystery photos.

Because these sites are generally labors of love, they tend to be a little less formal—perhaps browseable rather than fully searchable. Also, the gap in time between the submission of a photo (generally accomplished by e-mailing a scanned image or snail mailing a photo to the webmaster) and its actual appearance on the

Search Engines: Another Option

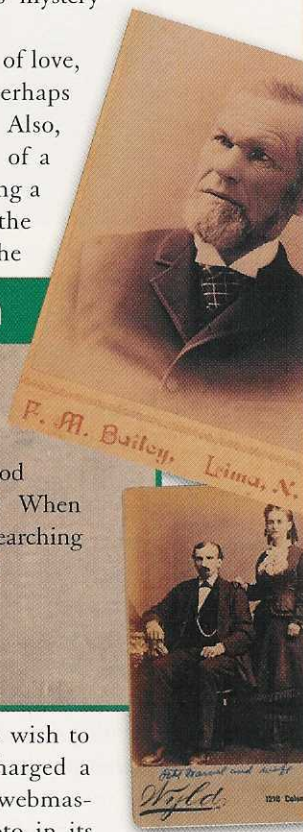
Some search engines allow you to search the Internet specifically for images. While testing shows that they are rather hit-and-miss at this point, a good genealogist knows to try every resource! When you have a minute or two to spare, try searching for surnames and place names of interest:

www.google.com
www.dogpile.com
www.altavista.com

site may be a little unpredictable. If you wish to claim an original photo, you may be charged a small fee to cover expenses or permit the webmaster to purchase and upload another photo in its place. Still, a little flexibility can get your mystery photos online at multiple sites and some pocket change might net you that long-lost photo you've been hunting for years.

As with the photobases mentioned above, only general purpose sites are covered here, but researchers may also want to seek out specialized photo collection sites such as Tombstones of the Pioneers at <http://tombstonesofthepioneers.com> or Kari Haraldsdatter Høglund's Old Family Photos site with its Norwegian emphasis at http://www.kari.no/photo/e_default.asp.

Note: All of the photos used in this article are orphan photos. Please contact us if you know the identity of one of the individuals featured.





Ancestor Photo Genealogy Archive (www.ancestorarchive.com)

Ancestor Archive is a collection of vintage family photos that have been found in antique stores and flea markets, on eBay, and through contributions by site visitors. By sending a scanned image to webmaster Donna Trewitt, you will be rewarded with a full page for your photo. The page will include all of the details you provide, as well as your e-mail address so others can contact you if necessary.

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For searchers, photo subjects are listed alphabetically by last name under the "Album" tab. A smaller cluster of orphan photos are alphabetized as best as possible under a separate section called "Mystery Photos."

Photographs from the Past (www.photographsfromthepast.com)

This Web site is dedicated to mystery photographs from the past. While some are webmaster Mary Ann Allen's personal photos, most are from visitors who have asked her to include their unidentified photographs. The site is fully searchable, or you can simply browse the pages of photo synopses, pausing to view any of interest. (Note that the search tool indicates surname only, but it actually combs all of the text.)

Full pages are devoted to each photo or a collection of related photos, and complete details are provided, including contact information for submitters. One particularly fun aspect of this site is that success stories are clearly marked, such as the century-plus photo of a German baker who was identified by the current mayor of his village.

Lost Leaves Photos (www.lostleavesphotos.com)

As with other orphan photo sites, the webmaster of Lost Leaves Photos collected many of her pictures from antique stores and flea markets with the intention of placing them online for identification and claiming. At present, the site contains thumbnails of over 400 photos.

A proof of direct descent and seven dollars plus postage will allow you to claim any original image on the site. The

webmaster also asks that you permit your contact information to be uploaded so that other interested parties may be able to obtain a copy from you in the future.

More Than Photographs

Bibles, letters, official documents, and other personal artifacts also stray from their respective owners over time. Several sites are dedicated to functioning as brokers that link possessors of all types of family memorabilia with their seekers.

Somebody's Links Newsletter: Genealogical Treasures Found (www.petuniapress.com/cgi-bin/s.cgi)

Any serious treasure rescuer or hunter will want to subscribe to Julia Case's newsletter. (Send an e-mail with "subscribe" as the subject to missinglinks-request@petuniapress.com.) Most issues are full of genealogical finds followed by a few success stories from earlier postings. A recent issue, for example, provided the happy news that a World War II-era photo of a mystery soldier had been returned to its rightful owner. The submitter, who lives in Missouri, was contacted by a Michigan-based relative of the soldier who now lives in Oklahoma. This reunion took less than two weeks to complete. Back issues of the newsletter are searchable online.

Your Past Connections (www.yourpastconnections.com)

Your Past Connections is dedicated to helping people find original items from their family's past. This free service with a searchable database of items (both requested and available) contains descriptions rather than images. At present, there are almost 1,600 requested items and 1,800 available items listed. Almost 4,000 frequent viewers have elected to receive "Connection Update" notifications alerting them when new entries have been added to the database. The site receives over 3,000 page views a day.

Ford and Nagle (www.ernet.com/fordnag/FordNagle.htm)

Larry L. Ford and Eric C. Nagle are self-described incurable collectors of antique family photos, Bibles, and documents from the Civil War period to about 1910. Their Web site alphabetically lists (by surname) hundreds of items they have found over the years. While few images are included, the



depth of content on this site makes it worth checking, particularly for researchers with Ohio or Kentucky ancestors. By way of example, a quick browse reveals sixty-one photos for surnames beginning with the letter A. Visitors who find something from their family can send an e-mail to obtain pricing and shipping details.

Ancestors Lost and Found (www.usgennet.org/usa/topic/ancestors/)

Ginger Cisewski's Web site contains descriptions (and some images) of both lost and found photos, Bibles, and other memorabilia. Visitors can submit photos by e-mailing Ginger or by scrolling through the listings that include, for instance, more than eighty family Bibles waiting to be returned to the appropriate people. A search engine will be added to the site shortly, making it even easier to use.

HeirloomsLost (www.heirloomslost.com)

The goal of this site is to reunite family mementos of the

Do-It-Yourself Photo Web Sites

If you've got a collection of orphan photos, you might consider creating your own site using one of these pre-fab options that allow you to construct a site within minutes and make it easy for invitees to post and view images:

- MyFamily.com (www.myfamily.com)
- Picture Trail (www.picturetrail.com)
- PhotoLoft (www.photoloft.com)
- PhotoPoint (www.photopoint.com)

To increase your chances of success, consider making the focus of your site a town or surname, rather than your family. Upload some photos and then search the Internet for appropriate candidates to invite. Someone who grew up in the same town as your grandmother or a newly discovered cousin of the same name may have the missing photo or information you seek.

past with the present generation. The site explains, "HeirloomsLost has two post lists. One is a post to the sale/show list for items you would like to sell or let others know you possess. The other is a post to the want list, which gives you the opportunity to post for items you are looking for that are traceable to a specific family name, time period, and/or location."

At present, some 1,600 letters, postcards, photos, and other items may be searched by family name (over 4,400 are currently represented), state, or item type. Searches can be

limited to just sale/show or wanted items. While this database does not incorporate images, submitters can point viewers to an offsite Web address for an image.

Yearbook Lady (www.3rdstbooks.com/yearbookpage.html)

A frequently overlooked source of photos is yearbooks, and it's hard to image that anyone could have a larger collection than Darilee Bednar. Darilee will search her collection of over 3,200 yearbooks if you can provide a few details such as name and approximate birth date or probable years of attendance. Her site is organized by state and is especially strong in Washington State and the rest of the West Coast. Be sure to also check out her list of yearbook lookup volunteers.

eBay (www.ebay.com)

Fortunately, the world of orphan photos and memorabilia is mostly populated by people who provide their services for free or at cost. Given the scope of eBay content, though, it would be unwise to ignore this commercial auction site. Searches on family names and the towns where they lived may turn up old maps, postcards, books, and more. I am currently waiting to hear whether I placed the winning bid on a detailed 1889 map of the city my great-grandfather emigrated to in 1890.

Spread the Word

The sites discussed above provide a valuable service to the family history community as a whole, and the more we use them (both as contributors and searchers) the more useful they will become to us. If you haven't already done so, take a few minutes to post some of the family history treasures you've plucked from local flea market so others will have a chance to discover them.

And if you're one of the lucky ones whose orphan photo has found its way back home to you, consider repaying the rescuer by making a small donation to one of these volunteer sites so that others may experience the pleasure of a reunion in the future! ♡

Megan Smolenyak, author of In Search of Our Ancestors, companion book to the 2000 PBS series, and the forthcoming Honoring Our Ancestors, can be reached through <www.honoringourancestors.com>.

