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## The power of pictures

Photos aren't merely images; they're connections to our past

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By **BILL MARVEL** / The Dallas Morning News

If you haunt flea markets, as I have from time to time, you sometimes run across old portraits, snapshots, even albums of family pictures. I found such an album in a Clarendon antiques store years ago and bought it for \$20.

Page after page, someone had lovingly laid out a family trip by automobile through Mexico in the 1920s.

I longed for the story of this trip, but there were no names to identify anyone, no address where I might find them. Who were these ghost people staring out at me, slowly fading from sepia to invisibility? Such remembrances of things past are almost unbearably poignant: All dressed up and nowhere to go. They are the opposite of Alzheimer's, where memories slip from the mind one by one. Here the memories remain, but the mind is gone.

The documentary film *Other People's Pictures* by Lorca Shepperd and Cabot Philbrick, a husband-and-wife team from New York, explores the reasons some people collect anonymous snapshots, photos by and of folks they don't even know.

Certainly it has a lot to do with nostalgia, says Ms. Shepperd. "A lot of people have something lost and this is a way to reclaim it." One man in the film lost his family photos when his mother joined a cult and threw them out. "He collects to replace," Ms. Shepperd says. To another collector, such photos are like abandoned children. "I now have all these films in my apartment

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and I can't get rid of them," he says. "I feel like their foster parent."

There's a mental experiment that psychologist Judy Weiser sometimes proposes to her clients.

"Imagine a world where nobody ever thought of making photographs," she begins. "What would be different in your life?"

From one point of view, perhaps nothing. You need food. You need clothes and shelter, and some means of making a living. Nobody ever perished for lack of a photograph.

Then why did so many of the evacuees who came out of Katrina mourn the loss of their family pictures? Beyond even the destruction of homes and heirlooms, the loss of a photo album or a treasured wedding portrait strikes us an almost physical blow. As though some part of ourselves has been lopped off.

In a way it has. People grieve the loss of photos, Ms. Weiser says, because "what's been killed is their connection to past."

Formerly of Houston, she is founder and director of the PhotoTherapy Centre in Vancouver, Canada, and author of *PhotoTherapy Techniques – Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums* (Phototherapy Centre Press, \$32.95). She uses photographs to guide her clients through their lives and relationships. Not in any pop-psych kind of way – "This picture reveals that you resent your mother." But in a way to draw out the stories the pictures tell – of those who made them, those who posed for them, and those who look at them.

"When we look at a photo," she says, "even though it's from years ago, we see that moment as now. As if it's alive, real, in three dimensions. We're not conscious that we're looking at a piece of paper. Our mind sees the photo as the person."

Photos bring the dead back to life, if only momentarily. In photos the old are young again. Broken relationships are mended. What was lost is found.

Don't just photograph grandma or grandpa, she says. Get in the picture with grandma or grandpa. "What you're going to want to remember in 20 or 30 years is your relationship with that person."

Without such photographs, Ms. Weiser says, "we wouldn't have any record of our growing-up years." It would be almost as though we never existed. The network of relationships that bind us to others would vanish.

This is what gives photo albums their almost irresistible

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power. Watch a family cluster around the family album at a reunion or birthday or funeral. Invariably, they recall the day the photo was made, what happened, who was there.

"People's family albums are representations of the story of their family lives in visual form," she says. "They're like the footprints of our lives. They reflect where we've been, but they also signal where we're going."

Look at the pictures in your own family album as children come to look more and more like their parents, then their grandparents. Watch who is in the photos, who drops out, Ms. Weiser says. Who is never in them, but behind the camera.

"Cameras don't take pictures," she reminds us. "People do."

"Any photo of two people is actually a photo of three people," she says, because the photographer is also "in" the picture. As time goes on, other people become part of the picture just by looking at it. They close the circuit, so to speak, because no photo is complete until it's looked at.

"The meaning of a photo is not in the photograph," says Ms. Weiser. "The meaning is put there by each viewer that looks at it. Each will see it a little differently based on what the surface image triggers." The fact that a photo has been put in an album or framed and hung on a wall means it is important to someone, she says.

And therefore, it deserves preservation.

It's too early to tell how digital photography will make this easier, or harder. The same fire or flood that destroys a shoebox full of old contact prints or a framed graduation photo can wipe out a computer's memory and obliterate a storage disc. The digital camera that makes it so much easier to take photographs seems to be making it harder to actually see and to share them, to hold them in your hand or hang them in a place of honor. Albums are being replaced by Web sites – suitable for single viewing, not so convenient to gather the family and pass from hand to hand.

Ms. Weiser says she wonders how many take their old family albums to Kinko's and pass them over the photocopier, page by page. Just to be safe.

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