

THE PHOTO FLOW OF FAMILY LIFE:  
A FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION<sup>1</sup>

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Within the academic field of folklore, photography still goes unrecognized as a folk form.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for over a century, people in many parts of the world have been collecting photographs of themselves and their loved ones.<sup>3</sup> Since the invention of the first Brownie camera, the activities of making and looking at family photographs have become an integral part of family relationships. The family photograph collection serves as an "archives" of family life -- a way of remembering the way people and events used to be, and also a way of passing on these memories to other members of the family.

This paper is a report on how photographs are used in one family to preserve and pass on the family heritage. I was not interested in analyzing what the photographs in the collection looked like, although many of them were quite beautiful or humorous, and I found all of them interesting. Rather, I wanted to discover how the family had selected the photographs for their collection and how the photographs were being used. I could find nothing in the literature to suggest that other research with these questions had been done.

My research involved three approaches to the material. First, I treated the family's collection of photographs as documents of family life: I interviewed members of the family about the subject matter of the photographs and recorded the life histories family members told. Second, I examined individual photographs to discover what qualities might "delight" family members<sup>4</sup> and then I compared my judgement with the family's judgement by asking them direct questions: I asked family members whether they considered individual photographs to be "good" pictures, and why or why not. And finally, I examined the way family history and tradition is relived and passed on through photographs. I included several generations of family members in order to examine how family history was transferred, not only through the individual photographs or the collection, but also through the interaction these artifacts evoked.

The Family and their Photographs

The photograph collection I chose spans five generations of the Hyytiäinen-Luostari-Farlow family. This family's collection is probably not unusual; it is an amorphous assortment of labelled and unlabelled photographs, made by a variety of professional and amateur photographers, that has accumulated in attic trunks, desk drawers, and shoe boxes. As the lives of family members change, new photographs are added and old ones are sometimes lost and thrown away.

Part of the collection came in a shoe box with Wilhemina (Minnie) Hyytiäinen Luostari when she moved to Paoli, Indiana, to live with her

daughter's family. Minnie was born in Finland in 1897, and had immigrated to the United States when she was nineteen. She settled in Ishpeming, Michigan, where she married Nicholas Luostari and raised her family. Minnie's daughter, Gertrude, had married James Farlow and moved to his hometown of Paoli, where he built up a law practice as they raised two daughters. Melissa Farlow, Gertrude's youngest daughter, was born in 1951, and grew up in Paoli. She took up photography while in college and became photo-editor of the school newspaper.<sup>5</sup>

Melissa had not known about her grandmother's photograph collection until the older woman showed her some of the photographs she had brought with her to Paoli. Minnie occasionally looked over the photographs and would talk about them with her daughter and granddaughters. Melissa decided she wanted copies of some of them, so Gertrude selected sixty pictures and sent them to Melissa at school for her to copy there. These sixty pictures became the core of the family photograph collection considered in this research project. I gave each photograph a number for identification, and conducted a series of informal interviews in the Farlow home in Paoli. They were group interviews, including Melissa, her mother, and her grandmother, talking together and with me about the family pictures.

### The Interviews

A first meeting was arranged, so I could get acquainted with Minnie and Gertrude and interview them about each of the sixty photographs. I designed the interview to focus on one picture at a time, as I asked who was in the photograph, when and where it was taken, and who the photographer was. I expected that Minnie, the eldest woman, would respond to most of these questions.

The first interview did not establish as clearly as expected the content and dates of each picture. Dates were often forgotten, places were often vaguely established, and the same persons were referred to in a variety of ways -- by their names and nicknames, by their relationships to the speaker or to some other member of the family. Nevertheless, I was able to divide the photographs into three rough categories, according to date and place taken. In a series of subsequent interviews, single categories of photographs were considered in greater depth.

The first group, covered in the second interview, included most of the photographs taken in Finland and pictures of Minnie's parents, including those taken on visits to her parents' home. The second group, forming the focus of the third interview, consisted of pictures taken after Minnie had immigrated to the United States. It included photographs taken during her early years in Ishpeming, early pictures of her husband, and photographs taken shortly after they were married, until they had their first child. The final interview covered the period when the Luostari children were growing up in Ishpeming or visiting their summer home on Fish Lake in Michigan, and the photographs of Minnie's grandchildren that had been included in the collection. The

second, third, and fourth interviews each began by asking for the spelling of family names and the clarification of points mentioned in the previous interview.

My interview procedure was to hand one of the participants a photograph, record the number of the photograph, and then ask all of them for information: about the occasion on which the photograph was taken; about the people in the photograph and how they were related; and about the aesthetics of each image -- what made it a good picture, one worth saving? Minnie, Gertrude, and Melissa often passed around the photographs, and more than one person usually commented on each. The procedure was complicated to some extent by the introduction of other photographs which were pulled out of their boxes. There was no way to identify the new entries and they could potentially have expanded the collection beyond a manageable size for the present research. However, some of these photographs proved to have interesting stories attached to them, and rounded out parts in the original sixty-item collection. As these photographs were included, the original research collection grew to seventy-eight photographs. Finally, I asked the three women about the collection as a whole: how did it evolve and how was it being stored and used? Their answers helped establish the role of the photograph collection in the life of the family.

#### Life Histories In and Around Family Photographs

Following the first interview, it was clear that looking at the collection of family photographs was a good way to find out about the family's background and the life histories of family members.<sup>6</sup>

The focus of the interview had been on the photographs, and no systematic attempt had been made to find out how people in the photographs were related. Nevertheless, enough information about family names and relationships emerged to construct a family tree. Asking a few direct questions about names and spelling in the second interview was sufficient to complete the tree, in some places for five generations.

The first interview also indicated that this family was like many Finnish-Americans, an impression that was born out in later interviews and by the reading I was doing in Finnish-American history. The Hyytiäinen family had come to the United States during the period of greatest Finnish migration, when many young Finns were "looking for change and adventure" away from the seclusion of rural life.<sup>7</sup> Minnie spoke of her father's "restlessness" as the main reason for coming to the United States.

Like many other Finns, Minnie's father, Emmanuel Hyytiäinen, worked in the mines, first in Pennsylvania, then after his family had joined him, in the copper mines of Ishpeming, Michigan, where there was a large community of Finns. The family returned to Finland for a few years and Emmanuel tried his hand at dairy farming. Soon, however, he had sold the farm and returned to the United States. Minnie was already back in

this country; she had returned when she was nineteen and was living with relatives in Ishpeming. She had received a grade school education in Finland and was a member of the Finnish Lutheran Church, an association she maintained in the United States. Like many of the young Finns who were drawn to America during the first decades of the twentieth century, Minnie and her Finnish-American friends continued to pursue the kind of group activities they had done in Finland.

Discussions of the photographs also provided some life stories of Minnie and her family. In response to pictures of the Ahola family farm, Minnie described moving into the large house with her mother when she was four years old and her father had gone to the United States for the first time. They lived there with Minnie's maternal grandmother and her uncle Wilho until they left for America.

The class photograph of the cooking school Minnie attended in Finland brought out descriptions of the Finnish custom of attending such schools to learn to make the traditional food. Minnie's Finnish-American friends in Ishpeming and the kinds of things they did together were described in response to a professional portrait of the group.

Looking at the photographs and answering questions about them often touched off stories that were not direct responses to the content of the photographs, but still provided interesting material about the women's lives. For example, a photograph of Minnie and her cousin Wilma with two friends started Minnie talking about her first job -- working in a hospital in Ishpeming with these friends. In response to a question about a photograph of Minnie's mother with her two grandchildren, Gertrude and Minnie began talking about the ten-year period spanning the Depression, when four generations of Hyytiäinen were living with them in the house in Ishpeming. And a picture taken during the fifties of Minnie and her husband on the back step of the cabin at their summer home (see Photograph 55), touched off a description of the recent remodeling of the camp.

Looking at the collection of family photographs with members of the family turned out to be an interesting way of developing family history and some life stories of individual members. While the descriptions did not emerge in a clear chronological order and were sometimes difficult to place geographically, the photographs also stimulated other stories which enriched the picture of family life.

#### The Significance of the Photographs for the Family

The family's reasons for collecting and treasuring these photographs differs from the folklorist's concern with life history in a cultural milieu. In his study of home photography, Chalfen found that the main reason families take pictures is to document some event in family life. Looking at the pictures then provides a vivid memory of the people and what they were like at the time.<sup>8</sup> Family portraits (for example, see Photograph 6) are one way of insuring that the memory will survive, and

often professional photographers were hired to make these. Important events were also captured in photographs: the first-born child with his mother; confirmation; and weddings and golden wedding anniversary celebrations (see Photographs 16 and 58) are examples. Visits with relatives were also important events to photograph. The pictures taken when Minnie and Gertrude visited Minnie's parents and brother in Massachusetts carry many fond memories. Or the events may be less momentous: often when asked why a particular photograph was taken, Minnie said it was "because we had new dresses" (in response to Photograph 20, for example). She had made most of her clothes, always in the latest fashion, and liked to get dressed up with a friend or two and go down to the photographer on First Street in Ishpeming to have her picture taken.

Photographs were often used as a way of communicating with family and friends who were far away. A friend visiting Minnie's parents took a picture and sent it to her. Friends visiting Finland found the Ahola family home and photographed the relatives there, so the family in America would know what it was like. A picture was taken of a young grandchild and a copy sent to her proud grandmother. Someone took two pictures of Minnie's parents arriving in the United States to send to her in Ishpeming. Usually, Minnie and Gertrude could not recall who had taken these pictures. The photographer was not important, but the photographs kept them in touch with faces and places that were far away. Each photograph in the collection carries some memory of a past event or the way family and friends used to be. Looking at the individual photographs helps recall those situations from the past.

#### The Significance of the Collection for the Family

The collection, however, is more than an assortment of individual photographs. In spite of the unsystematic way these pictures were taken and gathered over the years, as a group they provide an important link with the past. The memories that are sustained by looking through the old pictures are the memories of earlier selves. The collection provides a concrete link with past lives, and going over the collection is a way of communicating with the past. For Minnie, who brought the collection to her new home, the photographs seem to provide a continuous thread with her own past. For Melissa, who recently discovered the collection, the pictures provide a way to discover the past and link herself to it.

The collection itself is one way that memory is sustained and passed on to subsequent generations. Talking about the pictures is another way the family members recall and pass on their history. In the interviews it was apparent that the three members of the family were more interested in talking to each other about the photographs than in explaining them to me. They were continually bringing out more pictures to talk about together, and often did not explain these or even show them to me. When I introduced a photograph into the conversation, it was often members of the group who raised questions about the past.

In response to a photograph of her father's family, Gertrude followed up the interview question and asked her mother, "I never did hear -- how did you meet Isa (Father)?" When the conversation turned to how Minnie had learned to read and write (in response to my question), Gertrude asked her mother several questions about school in Finland and where she had learned English. Gertrude was especially interested in the people in the photographs -- who they were and how they related to the rest of the family. But she was also interested in the details of her mother's past, in things like where she had bought the beautiful fabric to make her clothes. And when Minnie's memory slipped, she would ask her daughter to help her remember details from the past. No doubt some of these questions were attempts by Gertrude to help me get the information I needed for my fieldwork, but most of the conversation between her and her mother seemed to grow from a genuine interest in the family's past.

Several times they talked about looking at collections of family photographs with other members of the family. Gertrude talked about going through them as a child. "Years ago we used to go through all kinds of these pictures," she said. "A lot of them were up in the attic in that old suitcase, and years back we used to like to go up in the attic and go through things." Minnie said that her nieces had told her that at the camp the previous summer, "They said they spent hours and hours sitting with the kids 'round the suitcase there, looking at the old pictures." More than once, Minnie mentioned what fun it was to go through the photographs with other members of the family.

The photograph collection helped to sustain the family's links with its past and provided a way of transferring an awareness of family history to the next generation. The photographs themselves provided concrete evidence of the past, and were treasured for that reason. The interaction within the family, revolving around the photographs, also served to transfer knowledge of the past to interested children. Thus family history was being transferred, not only through the photographs and the collection per se, but also through the narratives stimulated by the pictures.

#### The Folk Aesthetics of the Family Photographs

Part of the fieldwork focused on the photographs as the results of a creative process. By asking the family members to identify the photographer and evaluate the photograph on aesthetic grounds, I expected that the family's aesthetic of photography would emerge. However, the family members could seldom identify who took the picture. When asked who the photographer was, they usually tried to figure it out according to who was not in the picture. Gertrude had taken several of the photographs in the collection (for example, Photograph 55), and although she told interesting stories about how she took these pictures, her comments did not refer to any aesthetic considerations. The question of whether a particular photograph was a good one was

always met with something like, "yes, pretty good." Occasionally Minnie or Gertrude would say they liked a particular photograph or that it was "nice" (such was the response to Photograph 8), but did not explain their evaluation of it.

Their preferences for particular photographs appeared to be shaped by who was in them more than by how they were composed, or by the quality of the image. Gertrude was fond of photographs of her parents (particularly with their grandchildren) that had been taken by a member of the family (Photograph 57, for example). Minnie enjoyed the professional photographs of herself dressed up in some special outfit (as in Photograph 20). She also liked pictures of her children and grandchildren when they were young and doing something humorous. But neither of them made explicit references to preferring the work of the professional photographer over the photographs made by members of the family. Their evaluation of the photographs seemed to be based on whether or not it was a realistic representation of a person (including themselves) that they wanted to remember in a particular way.

Melissa was the exception. Much of her fascination with the photographs seemed to be based on aesthetic considerations. In an early interview she commented on the composition of several images, appearing to appreciate the simplicity of the design (as in Photograph 8). She also noted the arrangement of people in group photographs and wondered whether the spacing between people was the design of the photographer or of the subjects (see Photograph 6).

However, Melissa is a professional photographer with well-formulated ideas about what makes a good picture. She finds photographs interesting to look at in terms of their composition and what they say about the human relationships within the photographs; when she is asked why she likes a particular photograph, she can usually give several reasons. Melissa's understanding of photography is different from that of the average home photographer and most of his or her subjects. Her reasons for liking particular photographs clearly are based on different considerations than those of her mother and grandmother. Gertrude said she "knew nothing about photography" before her daughter became interested in it -- even though she had been taking family photographs off and on for thirty years!

But, as Henry Glassie suggests, "the lack of an aesthetic vocabulary does not prevent aesthetic operation."<sup>9</sup> The fact that Melissa can say what makes a photograph aesthetically pleasing, while her mother and grandmother cannot, does not mean that there is no aesthetic sense operating as they look at their family's photographs. It is this aesthetic of folk photography which needs further examination. Perhaps, as Glassie suggests, this cannot be done by direct questioning, but requires a structural analysis of the photographs themselves. I can offer no satisfactory explanation for why Minnie said "yes," when I asked (about Photograph 8) "Is that a good picture of your mother?"

Summary

Although the aesthetic operating within the collection and within the family's use of that collection is far from clear, the photographs and the collection as a whole provide links with the past important to the family tradition. As family members look at the photographs and exchange information about them, they revitalize family history for succeeding generations within the family.

## NOTES

1. An initial draft of this paper was written in late 1973 for a course on folklore fieldwork taught by Linda Dégh, Folklore Institute, Indiana University. I wish to thank Dégh, Steven Ohrn, Steven Feld, Richard Chalfen, and Michael Bell for their careful reading and reactions to the paper. I am also grateful to Minnie Luostari, Gertrude Farlow, and Melissa Farlow, whose generous cooperation made the research not only possible, but thoroughly enjoyable.
2. Folklore scholars frequently have used photographs to elicit responses from informants, but no one has examined the patterns of making, collecting, and looking at photographs as folk activities, or the photographs themselves as folk art. Within anthropology, Richard Chalfen of Temple University has done research on home photography and movie-making, and several of his students have done research on different aspects of what Chalfen has called "the home mode of visual communication." (See Chalfen's article elsewhere in this volume.) Within fine art, photography has sporadically been given recognition as a folk art, at least since 1944, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibited 350 snapshots which had been entered in Eastman Kodak Company amateur competitions. Newsweek referred to "the heretofore humble snapshot" typified by the exhibit as "an authentic American folk art." (Newsweek, 13 March 1944, p. 78.)
3. Michael F. Braive, The Era of the Photograph: A Social History (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966).
4. Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in Folklore and Folklife, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 276.
5. Since this research was done, Melissa has married and now works as a photojournalist on a newspaper in Louisville, Kentucky.
6. John Collier has reported similar results when interviewing families about their life and work, even though the photographs he used were not part of the family's collection, but had been taken by fieldworkers. ("Photography in Anthropology: A Report on Two Experiments," American Anthropologist 59 [1957]:843-59.)



7. A. William Høglund, Finnish Immigrants in America: 1820-1920 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 10.
8. Richard Chalfen, "Cinema Naivete: A Sociovisual Approach to the Home Mode of Visual Communication," Program in Ethnographic Film Newsletter, 4:3 (1973), 7-11.
9. Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 268.

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