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The Science of Deduction: Dating and Identifying Photographs in Twentieth Century Political Collections

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One of the more common analogies in archival literature is that comparing archivists to detectives. But even Sherlock Holmes, the "most perfect reasoning machine the world has ever seen" (in the words of his biographer, Dr. Watson),[1] might quail at the task facing an archivist who must identify and date photographs in twentieth century political collections. Bereft, in most cases, of the technological clues that enable those working with nineteenth century photographs to date by photographic process, the archivist faces a situation that, in the words of Canadian archivist Richard J. Huydra:

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1 Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (hereafter referred to as *CSH*), Preface by Christopher Morley (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1930), 161.

"presents numerous fundamental difficulties. Existing captions are often incomplete, inaccurate, deliberately distorted or irrelevant. For photographs with no captions, the task of identification is even more difficult. Recognition by memory or through comparison with other visual evidence is often inadequate and unreliable."[2]

Yet identification of these photographs is crucial. Apart from the traditional illustrative and biographical uses to which this type of photograph has been put, photographs from political collections have value as documentation in their own right. They may contain a wealth of information on the material culture and the social milieu through which a politician's career moved. As John Lovett, Jr. and John Caldwell, in their article on congressional photographs, point out, "the photograph has become an integrated part of research. . . .the photograph can complement the written record and, in some instances, present an aspect of the historical record not found in the written word."[3]

Archival considerations must also be taken into account. The process of appraisal is greatly assisted if proper identification can be made for the photographs. Photographs cannot be arranged into logical groupings unless the archivist can establish that the images were created at the same time to document the same event. Use is another consideration. In most cases, the researcher is looking for a specific person or event, a particular type of scene, or a specific photograph. Adequate access cannot be provided unless the photograph can be identified in sufficient detail for the user to determine that an image is the one desired and for the archivist to retrieve it.

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2 Richard J. Huydra, "Photographs and Archives in Canada," *Archivaria* 5 (Winter 1977-1978): 10.

3 John M. Caldwell and John R. Lovett, Jr., "Photographic Collections and Congressional History," *Extensions* (Fall 1986): 12.

A search of the archival literature does little to relieve the archivist's dilemma. Aside from works predominantly concerned with the identification of nineteenth century photographs, such as Booth and Weinstein's *Collection, Use and Care of Historical Photographs*,[4] little has been written about the process of identifying the contents of photographs, as opposed to identifying photographic processes. Even Ritzenthaler, Munoff, and Long's excellent *Administration of Photographic Collections* is lacking in this regard.[5] This is true for all types of photographs, not just those in political collections.

The process of identifying photographs in twentieth century political collections is similar to that for other types of photographs. Information is gathered from outside sources, usually the donor, experts with specialized knowledge in areas such as particular historical periods or artifacts, or reference works. The individuals and background details in the photograph are carefully examined and internal evidence is collected, with the photograph being compared to others if possible. All the evidence is combined, collated, and then analyzed in an attempt to produce an identification. The differences between identifying twentieth century political photographs and other types lie in the sources used and, more importantly, the inherent characteristics of the political photograph itself.

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4 Larry Booth and Robert A. Weinstein, *Collection, Use and Care of Historical Photographs* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977).

5 Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Gerald Munoff, and Margery Long, *Administration of Photographic Collections* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984). There is an excellent description of a photograph on page 57, but it appears in the section on appraisal. In that same section, the caption under Figure 3-4 on page 60 mentions that the "stained, out-of-focus photograph that appeared to have little visual appeal or research value" was the only extant photograph of the Paterson Silk Strike Pageant, yet there is no discussion of the identification process that led the archivists to that conclusion.

The nature of political photographs is complex. They are a combination of personal and public relations photographs. In addition, they also share some of the characteristics of a newspaper archive. Like their related manuscript collections, they can be very bulky. Political photographs are very "event-driven," documenting incidents such as campaign stops, trips, and visits by individuals to the politician's office, some of which are unique to political photograph collections. Although a politician has a home district, the peripatetic nature of political life often dictates that a collection will hold photographs from a wide variety of locations. There is usually a larger number of important or famous individuals represented in this type of collection than in others of comparable size.

All these characteristics necessitate the use of a wider variety of resources to aid in making identifications in political photograph collections than for other photographic collections. Some of these resources, such as congressional pictorial directories and legislative handbooks, are used almost exclusively for political photographs. The combination of all of these factors--the nature of the photographs themselves and the events they record, their bulk, the wide variety of locations pictured, the large number of famous individuals represented, and the multitude of sources used in their identification--serve to separate political photographs from other types of twentieth century photographs.

The first step in the identification process is to gather information from the donor, if possible. Can the donor provide any information as to the place, date, or individuals in the photograph? Although sometimes unreliable, the memory of the donor can be a valuable starting point for identifying and dating photographs. The donor, or another member of the family, often provides the only hope of identifying individuals and places pictured in a photograph, or of dating a photograph. Even if the initial identification is incorrect, the process of disproving it can bring to light valuable information.

It is best at this stage of the process to begin by writing down a description of the photograph, and then adding information as it is acquired. This can be done either by note-taking or by the use of a form. If the archivist makes these notes as detailed as possible, the final analysis will be made much easier.

Some archivists may object to the time and effort spent at this level of processing, pointing out that no manuscript series would be processed on an item-by-item basis. It should be noted that, although all photographs should have a brief description made for them (for security purposes, if nothing else), each photograph will not undergo the rigorous examination process outlined here. Captioned photographs, those with few or no clues to their origins, and photographs that can be grouped together and described en masse usually require less time than other photographs. Only the most important background items, which consist of those that are clearly visible and prominent (such as major buildings, ships, aircraft, etc.) or those that are central to the identification of the photograph, need to be identified; effort should be concentrated on the who, the why, the when, and the where. With the penchant that patrons have for requesting photographs on the basis of the important individuals they contain, access considerations alone may dictate this level of processing. If the photographic collection has been properly appraised as having permanent value, then it is worth the same amount of time and effort that would be lavished on a comparable manuscript series.

The next step is to examine the photograph and its surroundings. Is there a caption or processing stamp on the front or back? Has the caption come loose? How complete is the caption? If the photograph was enclosed with a letter or other document, can that item provide any information about the photograph?

Information from these sources should be treated with caution. Memories fail, captions and other written information may be incorrect, and processing dates stamped on the photograph may be days, months, or even years after the photograph was actually taken. This does not mean all such information should be rejected out of hand; it does mean that it should be viewed critically.

It is often a good idea to begin the examination of the image itself by trying to identify the individuals in the photograph, since this is usually an easier matter than trying to identify the place or date. If a politician only served a limited term in office or represented a limited geographic area, identifying that individual in a photograph may serve to narrow possible dates or places. A useful tool for identifying members of Congress after 1951 is the *Congressional Pictorial Directory* (it was called the *Pocket Congressional Directory* until 1967), published biannually by the Government Printing Office; it is arranged alphabetically by state. For state legislators and other state officials, the best source is legislative handbooks published by the states themselves. For example, both the *Georgia Official and Historical Register* and South Carolina's *Legislative Manual* contain portraits of members of all three branches of state government.[6]

Portraits of other individuals may be found in publications such as *Current Biography*, the *New York Times Index* (which identifies illustrated obituaries), and the *New York*

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6 *Congressional Pictorial Directory* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office); *Georgia Official and Historical Register* (Atlanta: Department of Archives and History); *Legislative Manual* (Columbia, S.C.: General Assembly of South Carolina).

Times Biographical Service/Edition. Biographies and general historical works are also sources of portraits that can be used to aid identification.[7]

Holmes once said, in the story "A Case of Identity," that it was a long-held axiom of his "that the little things are infinitely the most important."[8] The details in a photograph--clothing, objects, landscape and architecture--are very useful in dating, identifying places and for grouping photographs. When trying to date a photograph by using details, it is best to attempt to find clothing or objects whose style is distinctive and whose period of use is narrowly defined--as Holmes might say, "singularity is almost invariably a clue."[9] For example, a photograph of a politician visiting a military base may have equipment in the background and will certainly include soldiers in uniform. Uniform styles and equipment have limited service lives, which can be used to narrow the time period in which a photograph may have been taken. Background details such as buildings can be useful; Booth and Weinstein discuss the use of landmarks in dating photographs.[10] Another detail to look for is dates *in* the photograph; photographs have been dated because a desk calendar was clearly visible (and legible) in the picture.

Using details, especially in dating photographs, should be done cautiously. Clothing styles change more slowly in the hinterlands than in a large city such as New York, and economic considerations may necessitate the use of clothing far beyond the time when it has gone out of style. Building styles, or even the buildings themselves, may be copied from

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7 *Current Biography* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1955-); *New York Times Index* (New York: New York Times Co., 1913-); *New York Times Biographical Service/Edition* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International).

8 Doyle, "A Case of Identity," *CSH*, 194.

9 Doyle, "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," *CSH*, 202.

10 Booth and Weinstein, *Historical Photographs*, 40-41.

one location to another, from one time period to another. It is best to base an identification or date on more than one detail and to examine everything critically.

Identifying places involves the ability to recognize architectural and geographic features. Since a politician may travel widely during his career, it is impossible to be familiar with all of the places he visited. This means the archivist must look for distinctive landmarks or a specific sequence of buildings along a street which can be compared with an already identified view. The archivist must also be able to identify landmarks by using certain specific features, since the entire landmark may not be visible. This may mean identifying a building using only a doorway, or a lake by its distinctive shoreline.

When grouping photographs, using details for pattern recognition is essential, whether the task at hand is determining whether a group of photographs are all of the same event or deciding that a photograph is part of (or related to) an already existing collection. This is the point at which an archivist has enough information to begin comparing photographs with one another. Rather than looking for singularity, the archivist is now looking for repetition. For example, it is reasonable to assume that a series of photographs were taken at the same time when the clothing of the individuals and some of the background features are repeated from photograph to photograph. William Frassanito used this technique to good effect in his 1976 study of photographs taken at Gettysburg.[11]

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11 William A. Frassanito, *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976). Other books by this author using the same process of photographic analysis are *Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Day* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978) and *Grant and Lee: The Virginia Campaigns* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983).

The number of sources that can aid in the identification and dating of photographs is only limited by the imagination and creativity of the archivist. A source that is not utilized as much as it should be is "experts." They range from university professors to local amateur historians with specialized knowledge to technicians. For example, a language professor may be able to translate a Chinese inscription in a photograph taken in Taiwan during a congressional committee tour, while a textile worker may be able to identify a machine that appears in the background of a mill scene.

Experts even include the archivist and his staff. Through their own expertise, based on their knowledge of the repository's collection, the locality, the local history of the area, and outside knowledge that they bring from their own experience or education, they can succeed in making a correct identification. Booth and Weinstein note that, over time, one can "develop a sense of recognition of the terrain, its objects, and its structures, that materially help in identification and dating."[12]

There are a wide variety of sources for identifying automobiles, aircraft, ships, clothing, architecture, and other objects that appear in photographs. A few examples follow. For architecture, Blumenson's *Identifying American Architecture* and *A Field Guide to American Houses* by the McAlesters are both useful for identifying the styles of buildings in the United States. Both are arranged chronologically, with the *Field Guide* being more detailed in its treatment of the subject.[13]

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12 Booth and Weinstein, *Historical Photographs*, 35-36.

13 John J.-G. Blumenson, *Identifying American Architecture: A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977); Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

A useful guide for identifying American furniture is *Clues to American Furniture*.[14] It is arranged chronologically and by style, and contains useful line drawings. Like the *Pictorial Guide* alluded to above, this publication is a "quick and dirty" guide and is less detailed in its coverage of the subject of American furniture than other sources.

Both the *Dictionary of Costume* by Wilcox and *The Encyclopedia of World Costume* by Yarwood are comprehensive in their treatment of the history of clothing and are profusely illustrated, but both suffer because they are arranged alphabetically by subject, rather than chronologically. Wilcox has also written a chronologically arranged history of clothing in the United States entitled *Five Centuries of American Costume*. It concentrates on everyday dress and is particularly good for identifying clothing from earlier periods in the country's history and military dress.[15]

There are numerous books on ships, aircraft, and automobiles. *Jane's* is still the standard for both ships and aircraft, especially those used by the military. The Olyslager Auto Library, published by F. Warne of New York, and Tad Burness's *American Car Spotter's Guide, 1940-1965* and *American Car Spotter's Guide, 1966-1980* are only examples of the many books that picture automobiles.[16] Some automobile books are devoted to single models, such as the

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14 Jean Taylor Federico, *Clues to American Furniture* (Washington, DC: Starhill Press, 1988).

15 R. Turner Wilcox, *Dictionary of Costume* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969); Doreen Yarwood, *The Encyclopedia of World Costume* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978); R. Turner Wilcox, *Five Centuries of American Costume* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

16 *Jane's Fighting Ships* (New York: Jane's Publishing Co., 1916-); Olyslager Auto Library (New York: F. Warne); Tad Burness, *American Car Spotter's Guide, 1940-1965* and *American Car Spotter's Guide, 1966-1980* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International, 1978 and 1981).

Model T or the Corvette. Any large public or university library should have enough of these types of publications to provide for most of the archivist's needs.

It is best to use more than one source to identify an item, not only as a means of verification, but to take advantage of the different types of information publications provide. For example, in identifying American warships, one should use *Jane's Fighting Ships* and the *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* in tandem.[17] *Jane's* is arranged by country, then by type of vessel within each country, and then by the ship's identifying number, such as CV-2 for the first U.S.S. *Lexington*. The identifying number is often the only clue to the identity of a warship on an uncaptioned photograph. The *Dictionary* is arranged by the name of the ship and provides information on the history of the vessel, including the ship's home ports during various stages of its career and major voyages the vessel undertook. This kind of information can be very useful in dating a photograph, since a vessel may only be in a location at specific times during its life.

The final step in the process of identification is to correlate and analyze all of the information obtained in the previous stages. At this point the notes taken earlier are most useful. The archivist should take into account any discrepancies and the possible reasons for them, and base the identification on more than one piece of information, if possible. Making a successful identification requires care, respect for accuracy, patience, and the ability to reason logically--"when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."[18] This portion of the process is probably the most intuitive, more of an art than a science. Once a photograph is

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17 *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy/Government Printing Office).

18 Doyle, "The Sign of the Four," *CSH*, 111.

identified, it can act as "a type of Rosetta Stone. . .[allowing] you to spread out from. . .the known point, to other unidentified areas, the unknowns."[19]

Figure 1. Detail from original photograph, "Marcus at 'Calder's Universe,' Atlanta, Georgia, April 1977." Glass case described in example is to the left of the men in the original. Sidney J. Marcus Papers, Richard B. Russell Memorial Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

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[19] Booth and Weinstein, *Historical Photographs*, 42.

An example based on an actual problem in identifying a photograph will serve to show how the process of identification, using the techniques and sources mentioned, works. An uncaptioned photograph was discovered in a collection of photographs from a state legislator that showed the legislator with two men, one with his back to the camera and the other with his face partially visible. (See Figure 1.) There was a glass case in the left background which contained two objects, and there were other objects hanging from the walls. A processing date of "AUG 1977" was stamped on the back of the photograph.

The archivist was able to identify the man whose face was partially visible as another state legislator, since the archivist had previously identified him in another photograph by using a state legislative handbook. The archivist knew that the date on the back of the photograph could not be too inaccurate, since both men had served together for a specific period of time, which included the year 1977. But he could not be sure that the date was correct, nor did he know where, or for what reason, the photograph was taken.

The archivist began to examine the objects in the background more closely, using a magnifying glass, and was able to identify the objects on the wall as mobiles. He remembered seeing something similar at a museum that he had visited and that the artist who created those objets d'art was named Alexander Calder. This dimly held memory sent the archivist scurrying to the online catalog to find any illustrated books the library had on Calder's work. Finding three books that he thought would be useful, the archivist began to compare the illustrations in the books with the mobiles in the photograph.

None of the mobiles matched. But looking through the illustrations in one of the books, two of the objects pictured looked suspiciously similar to the objects in the glass case in the background. Examining the photograph under magnification removed all doubt; the objects in the case were "Fish

Pull-Toy" and "Wooden Bottle with Hairs," both by Calder. Obviously, the group in the photograph were at an exhibition of Calder's work.

The archivist checked a list of exhibitions in the appendix of one of the books and discovered that in 1977 an exhibition entitled "Calder's Universe" had toured the United States. Since the photograph was in the collection of a man who had represented a district in a large metropolitan area, it was likely that the exhibition had visited that city. Searching through a periodical similar to the city magazine *Washington Monthly* revealed that the exhibition had been there in April 1977. It was likely that the photograph had been taken at that time and had not been processed until August.

As a result of this careful examination, the archivist could now date the photograph to a specific month. He could also identify two of the three individuals in the photograph, as well as the place and the event.

In spite of an archivist's best efforts, inevitably there will be photographs that defy all attempts at identification. These items should be described as fully as possible, in the hope that more information will eventually be obtained. A tickler file should be developed to identify photographs that need more information, to act as a memory aid. It is also a good idea to review these items and to keep them in mind as newly accessioned photographs arrive. The archivist should always be willing to change an identification if better information becomes available.

The identification and dating of photographs in political collections is crucial for their use. As the example shows, by following a strategy of meticulous examination, judicious use of available informational resources, previous knowledge, and careful reasoning, an uncaptioned photograph can be accurately dated and identified. This process is not only

useful for this type of photographic collection, but for others as well. The "game's afoot" for the archivist who must deal with photographs in political collections.

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