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holding up fine.

I'm sure that this is the exception that proves the rule though. I find faded photos mildly depressing, like they are trying valiantly but just can't maintain their integrity.

Posted by: Benjamin Marks | Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 01:15 PM

I shot nothing but slides for the first decade or so of my photo obsession, and some of them (in my humble opinion) are quite good. But they're already getting difficult to access. I've been through three generations of dedicated film scanners, and the last (a Minolta 5400 dpi film scanner) is already unusable without resorting to Vuescan due to the absence of updated drivers compatible with modern operating systems.

Scanning slides means devoting a substantial block of time to finding the slide I want (thankfully they're reasonably well-organized and labeled). Then I'm slogging through the awkward software interface, spending up to an hour fussing with the actual scan until it's usable, then finally some Photoshop time. So they're accessible to me, kind of, but there's a serious bar to jump to get there from here. Needless to say, once I have a keeper in digital form, it gets backed up thoroughly so I don't have to do it again.

Compare that to digital capture- a few moments with Adobe camera raw, whatever Photoshop work the image requires, and it's ready to go. And the digital negative (raw file) is still there any time I want to get at it for another interpretation.

The biggest problem I see with digital longevity is the signal-to-noise problem. It's so easy to keep thousands (or millions...) of captures, it becomes ever harder to find the far smaller number that are artistically worthy. I try to edit ruthlessly and organize my files logically, but I still worry that in a decade or two I'll be struggling to find that image I want to print again.

Posted by: Geoff Wittig | Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 01:11 PM

Too much data is certainly a major issue.

Although I have all my images copied in triplicate on multiple hard drives, I can honestly say there are only a minute proportion of my images that I worry about keeping for posterity.

Hence, for digital, I have a top 1000 portfolio (actually 897 so far) converted to DNG. For negatives, I have about 200 scanned and saved as TIFFs. That represents about 0.2% of my output, but it's enough.

These are sufficiently small to fit on a handful of my older "slow" SD cards. Copies live with my family and friends and I recycle them periodically.

So far I have not lost a single item of data from an SD card, but I still make duplicates to be sure. CDs and DVDs are a lot less reliable in my experience.

Posted by: Steve Jacob | Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 01:24 PM

I suspect that the people who care will back everything up and make sure shifts in format etc. get accounted for. These are the same people who would have prints and film in decent condition because they took care to archive properly.

Everyone else will lose everything the next time they get a severe enough virus infection or the hard drive dies, or might find they can't read the files any more (been there, done that). Actually these days it could happen if they drop their cellphone. In essence, their entire digital life is stuffed into a shoe-box in the basement, just like their now faded, torn and dog-eared photographs and fingerprint-plastered negatives were.

Digital's advantage is making it possible to create multiple perfect copies of the original, but only if you make the effort to do so.

Posted by: Paul Glover | Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 01:27 PM

Dear folks,

Two broadly written thoughts, to address many people's remarks:

1) It is important to remain unconfused on theory vs common practice. All of you talking about how easily you can or can't preserve your film/digital photographs are failing to take into account that most people don't engage in those practices. This column was about what really happens, not about what you could do. Fact is that it's pretty easy to reasonably ensure huge longevity for digital photographs. It's even easier to ensure multi-century longevity for film photographs. (It's called a frost-free refrigerator and poly-sealed bags, and it'll work for everything except SX 70-style Polaroids. Proven technology).

But the overriding fact is that this is irrelevant because by and large people have not taken these measures and do not do so today. As I said, we're talking about what ordinary people do, and pretty much everything you're all suggesting is, as I said, extra-ordinary.

In that vein, I am not saying that things are in a good state now, digitally. What I did say is that I have reasons to think they will get much better, relatively quickly.

And, yes, William, the Film Era is over. That is a simple historical fact, based on preponderance of types. It's not an ideological point, it's a statistical one.

2) For all those who asked why it's even important to preserve this stuff beyond our immediate lives, well... for easily 90% of us it isn't, personally. That's anybody whose theologies don't have them fretting over what happened in their previous life after they die (that includes those who prefer the "null hypothesis", since they won't be fretting over anything, period). For most of us, once we're dead we have no interest in what happened to our photographs; we either have other fish to fry or no fish at all.

(On the other hand, if you're one of the many people whose photographs haven't even lasted their present lifetime, you may be taking this question a little more seriously.)

The reason to care about what happens to your photographs after you die is because they may possibly be important to others, and you really have no idea what will or won't turn out to be important. When they were only five years old, who knew that Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton would end up being US presidents. I picked them because their childhood backgrounds are such that there is no obvious path to the White House unlike, say, a Kennedy or a Bush where it is at least plausible they would end up being "Someone Important."

There are huge chunks of history where we don't know a whole lot about how regular people lived, precisely because the records of regular people weren't considered worth preserving.

If you don't think this is important, fine. Then you're not one of the people who's worrying about how long their photographs will last and this whole column really isn't about you. Me, I'd rather have your stuff around than not.

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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 01:28 PM

Even the cheapest litho inks on acid-choked lignin-filled newsprint stock can easily last a century or more under reasonable storage, display, and handling conditions... and indefinitely if heroic measures were to be taken (e.g. low temperature storage). As is evidenced in many of the replies to this post, and in forum after forum, the real challenge is to know what those reasonable conditions are and to maintain them at all times. This outcome can only be achieved with a strong will to preserve. It's true of the analog era in photography, and it hasn't changed one bit (no pun intended) in the digital age. The less durable the product, the more narrow the range of "reasonable" environmental conditions one is required to maintain That's the reality of the situation.

Without active collection management activities and a deliberate effort to avoid as Mike says "the trough of no value", it's not just photographs that are vulnerable to loss. In fact, I'm hard pressed to think of any man made object where we couldn't be having the same discussion. So, perhaps it is because the fundamental EXPECTATION of the photographic process has historically been to function both as "memory keeper" and "memory sharer" which underscores so many peoples' concern about the intrinsic longevity of photographs.

Today, digital has shifted the functionality much more to easy share than easy keep, IMHO, even though many people advocate digital images are going to be easier to keep as well. I think the jury is out on that. The time span for the trough of no value to kick in and destroy digital records is very short. Meanwhile, I see a whole new generation of youthful picture takers who have imposed a remarkably low bar for image longevity. Their main purpose with photography is to post an "instant replay" of personal current events on social media websites. They regard the image as inherently temporal, to be replaced very soon by other more "up to date" moments in their lives.

All that said, when the goal finally shifts to "memory keeping" then image persistence, durability, longevity (call it what you will) becomes an issue worth paying some attention to. When things go wrong with those best laid plans for environmental safekeeping and come up short for extended periods of time, products that exhibit greater intrinsic resistance to chemical and physical deterioration are likely to contribute significantly more to their own chances of survival. Within any one process category (inkjet, for example) product durability spans a very large quality range, and there are many variables. That's why I study print durability issues, but I readily concede that many folks don't really care about print permanence any more, especially now that printing is no longer an essential component for sharing photographs.

regards,
Mark
http://www.aardenburg-imaging.com

Posted by: MHMG | Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 01:32 PM

Dear Ed,

What you say is pretty much true, but do not confuse data and information. Data only matters if you're doing scientific record-keeping. Every restoration I do, of necessity, sacrifices some data. Really, any photographic manipulation does. But sometimes that increases the amount of information conveyed to the viewer. I have done occasional restorations where I know my restoration does a better and more complete job (for various meanings of those adjectives) of portraying the subject than the original photograph did. There are tricks I have to correct inherent deficiencies in original materials like poor tone and color rendition in print papers, for example.

I mention this, not because it's the norm, but it is just so bloody much fun when I can do a restoration that I can confidently say comes out better-than-new. It's a little like magic.

No, it's a lot like magic.

Except without that ever-multiplying marching broomstick thing.

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Dear Christian,

Thanks! I am unreasonably (although not unjustifiably) proud of figure 1; it was a real tour de force. In fact the original looks even more blank than the reproduction here; I haven't been able to come up with a scan and screen illustration that looks as faded and bad as the original did to my eye.

That photograph taught me to run a test scan on any photograph I was considering restoring, no matter how hopeless it looked. Those electronic sensors can see things that I can't.

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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 16 June 2011 at 01:35 PM

I would only like to state that we should not confuse restoration (meaning of the original artifact) with a new digital or analog copy....this is more "recovery"-as a former photographic conservator I feel that we should be careful as sometimes only the information is needed....but conserving an original artifact is different that scanning it and using technology to "recover" the lost image..

Posted by: robert lyons | Monday, 20 June 2011 at 04:29 PM

The comments to this entry are closed.
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