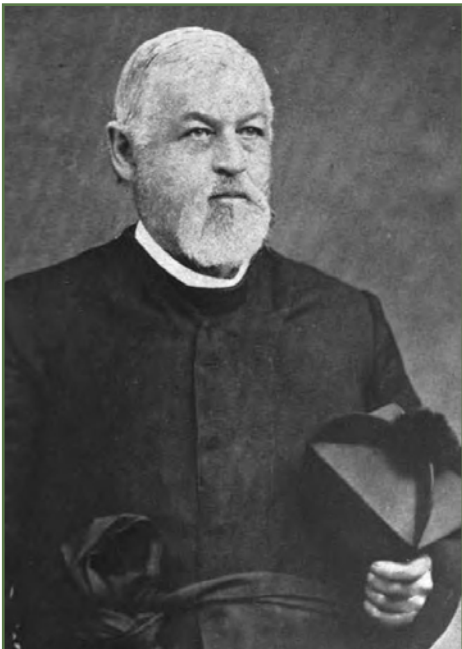


Photo Finish



Rev. Hannibal Goodwin

Long before the birth of photography in the 1830s, people wanted to have images of those they loved that could be carried around with them. That demand was most often met by artisans who created miniature portraits painted on delicate ivory wafers or silhouette portraits skillfully cut from paper. By the mid-1800s daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, and albumen prints created access to 'modern' photography for the general population, allowing individuals and families to sit for portraits at local studios. Carte de visites ('CDVs') and cabinet cards, photographs printed on thin paper mounted on thicker paper stock, were all the rage. Many of the sitters who look out at us from those old CDVs and cabinet cards with austere, unsmiling faces seem to say that the experience of having your photograph taken was anything but pleasant. Much of that apparent angst was simply the result of the requirement that the sitter remain absolutely still for several minutes during the photography process.

The role and reach of photography was transformed in the 1880s when New Jersey's own Reverend Hannibal W. Goodwin invented celluloid film and his competitor George Eastman developed the first Kodak personal camera. In no time, photography became an activity accessible to the mainstream population. As fascinated as Americans were with their cameras, some expressed a concern about the risk to personal privacy posed by strangers snapping away in public places without the permission of their subjects. The term 'camera fiend' was soon coined to describe those who would today be called 'paparazzi' and just like today, some of those who fell prey to those camera 'fiends' took the situation into their own hands, wresting the camera away from its owner and smashing it on the ground.

For anyone doing genealogy research, having old family photos can be a real gift—if the photos include a notation giving the name of the sitter. Having a pile of unmarked old photos that no one can identify is not much better than having none at all. Now is the time to pull out those old black-and-white and color snapshots, flip them over, and make note of the people, places, and occasions captured in those photos.

This was made very clear to me recently during the last months of my mother's life. I had possession of what had been my mother's collection of family photos along with the



Author's Great-Grandmother
Germany, circa 1885



Author's Father & Grandmother
Larino Italy, 1928

photos that had belonged to both of my grandmothers. I decided it was time for me to go through all of them, one by one, the objective being to label them, put the best and most important of them into albums, and decide what to do with those I could not identify. For almost two months, my dining room table was buried in piles of photos spanning at least seven decades of the 20th century. It began with random piles of photos dumped on the table from shoeboxes and large manila envelopes or peeled off the pages of old, non-archival albums. (Yes, some of those old albums were the kind with the deadly sticky adhesive pages.) As part of the project, I also went through all the childhood photos of my own children—school pictures included. I slowly sorted the mountains of photos by family branch, putting duplicates aside and eventually passing those on to my cousins. It was daunting, a lot of work, and a slow-go. More than once I wished I hadn't started such a tedious project and wondered if I would ever finish . . . but I did.

When I finally finished, I had a paternal album that began with 1920s photos of my Italian immigrant grandparents and included the passports and ship paperwork that brought them to this country along with many precious mementos of their lives in Italy and as new Americans. Likewise, I had a maternal album that included so many wonderful photos of my young mother from the 1930s, 40s and 50s along with little treasures like her Sunday school attendance awards. I made albums for each of my sons containing photos of them from their newborn days through their teenage years. I also made another album with photos of my husband's parents and extended Polish family. It wasn't a perfect job but it ensured that our family photos were organized and ready to be passed on to future generations.

After I closed the last album and put it up on the shelf in the closet, I was left with a dilemma. There was still one small stack of photos on the dining room table—the 'unidentified'—people I did not recognize (nor did anyone else I asked) and out-of-focus shots beyond recognition. Having been happily up to my elbows in genealogy and historical research for over 30 years, I could not bear the thought of throwing them in the trash or the paper recycling bin. I vacillated and then finally decided to give them my own version of a dignified death by cremation: I put them through the paper shredder and reduced them to fine wisps of paper 'ashes.' I knew I had made every effort to reconnect them to our family history and only wished that, years ago, someone had taken a pencil and scribbled their names on the backs of those photos.


We sometimes lament that our young people are not more interested in family history and the stories of the people whose lives literally made our own possible. One thing we 'mature'



Author's Uncle, Circa 1925



Author's Mother - 1946

folks can do is to prepare those stories, photos, and mementos for the handoff to our children and grandchildren. Aggregate, cull, sort, label, document, and organize now. It will make sharing your ancestors easier for you and more interesting and cohesive for them. A shoebox full of loose photos can't tell a compelling story. In this age of digital photography and email, it is more important than ever to preserve the paper remnants of the past so that the stories and faces familiar to us will be known to future generations. 



The author visiting Santa at Macy's
34th Street, Manhattan, 1954

*"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains
as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge
hidden in every cell of our bodies."*

— Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

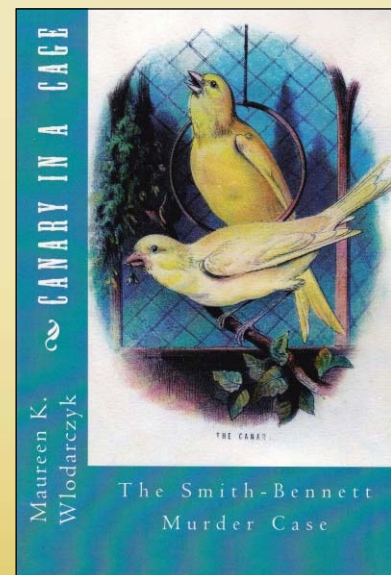
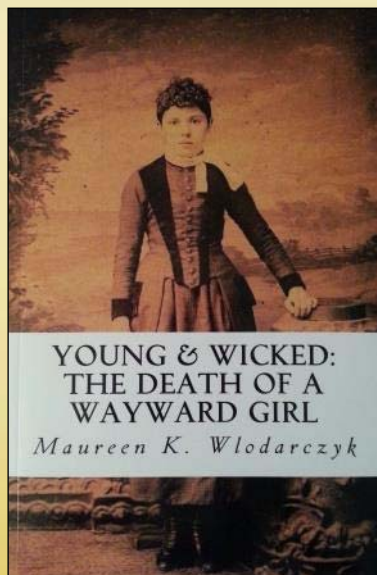
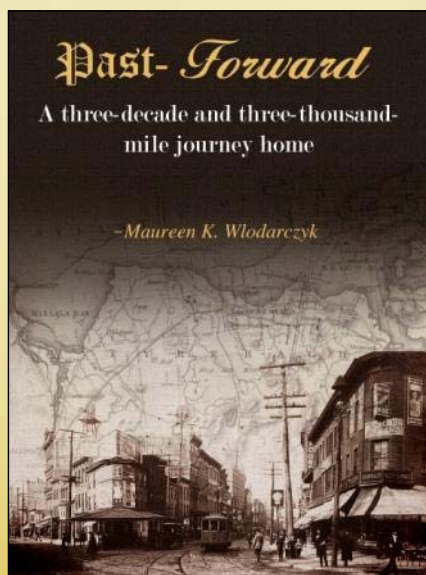
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