

Harvesting the River Activity: Analysis of a Historical Photograph

Objective: to retrieve social, cultural, and historical information from an historical photograph by analyzing the contents.

Motivation:

If one is researching an historical subject, old photographs are primary documents that yield information about people, events, and places. Armed with a set of questions, a researcher can glean information that complements, fills in, or augments the written record.



ONLINE Collections:

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/images/>

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/art/collections/sadorus/>

Other Sources: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/workshop/discover/index.html>

American Memory Project Lessons on Primary Source Use

Procedure: Guidelines for Analysis

1. Identify the photograph by inspection

Is there any written identification such as a title, signature, date, or comment in or on the photographic print?

Where was the photograph found — family album, archival library, someone's estate, in a sale?

What clues, if any, does the source give you?

Using your knowledge or research information about the art or technology of photography, what do you discern may be the approximate date of the photo?

2. Identify the contents of the photographic composition by inspection

Are there any people in the photograph?

What are they doing?

What are they wearing?

Where are they?

How are they interacting?

Is it a candid or posed composition?

3. Try to discern the purpose for the photograph?

Was it personal, to be published?

Does the photograph illustrate an event, an action, an occupation, a celebration?

Does it appear to be an amateur, a commercial or a professional photograph? The paper on which it is printed may give you clues.

4. Analyze the composition.

Divide the composition into several sections and list the objects in each section.

Classify the objects into types or categories (e.g., work and tools, family members and associated memorabilia).

Decide which details give historical or cultural meaning to the photograph and describe in words.

5. Interpret/Evaluate the photograph

What, if any, deductions, inferences, specific information, or generalizations can you make about the subject of the photograph and the photograph as a whole as an historical document?

What questions for further research does the photograph prompt?

What cultural information does the photograph contain? Examples: humor (“Double Exposure of Warren”), pun (“I grew Up in the Corn Belt”), joke (“Warren Sadorus-Post No Bills Here”), drama, pose, action (“The Punkin Orchestra”), game (“April 18, 1910” depicts a coming snowball fight), sport, costume, custom (“Christmas Treats”), printed matter (“GWB Sadorus reading”), architecture (“Sadorus Home”)

Assessment (Use of this analysis tool in research reports): This exercise is a learning tool for doing primary research. Students should feel comfortable after analyzing several photographs in this manner. Options for use of this information in their research: 1) use as an interpretive caption when including the photograph in their report; 2) integrate the information from the analysis directly as text; 3) use multiple images for cultural and historical interpretation or inferences.

Analysis should reflect the visible details of the photograph and be backed up with written material when possible. (For example, for Frank Sadorus’ photograph, “The Card Players,” what card games were popular in 1910? Which game does the hands and discard motions indicate it might be? Research rules of games.)

Illinois State Board of Education Standards:

Social Science

18.A. Compare characteristics of culture as reflected in language, literature, the arts, traditions and institutions.

Middle School: 18.A.3 Explain how language, literature, the arts, architecture and traditions contribute to the development and transmission of culture.

Early High School: 18.A.4 Analyze the influence of cultural factors including customs, traditions, language, media, art and architecture in developing pluralistic societies.

Late High School: 18.A.5 Compare ways in which social systems are affected by political, environmental, economic and technological changes.

18.B. Understand the roles and interactions of individuals and groups in society.

Middle School: 18.A.3b Explain how social institutions contribute to the development and transmission of culture

18.B.3a Analyze how individuals and groups interact with and within institutions (e.g., educational, military)..