

Fading Photographs



Photography as we practice it was invented in the 1840s in France. By the 1860s and the start of the Civil War in the United States there were enough cameras in use to provide the first widespread photographic record of historical events. Who isn't familiar with Mathew Brady's scenes of President Lincoln posing in front of a battlefield tent?

The 1860s was a period no longer after the invention of the camera than, say, the average life of a household refrigerator.

The technology of photography spread quickly, and with it a responsibility was born that most people didn't think of — until too late. It is that responsibility which I want to press upon you now.

By the 1920s, millions of photos had been taken and perhaps millions of people had appeared in them. Movies were already being made by stringing together thousands of rapidly-shot tiny images and replaying them rapidly between a lamp and a reflective screen.

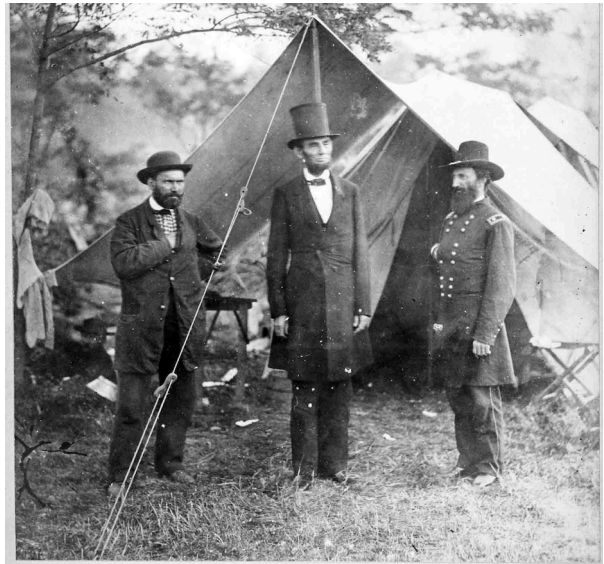
By the 1920s, also, the people who had appeared in the earliest photos ever taken were mostly no longer with us. But their children were still living. The people who held those earliest photos in family albums and lockets and ornate frames knew who they were. When I was a child, my parents, born in the mid-1920s, could name every face in every photo in our three or four family albums, even though some of those photos had been taken fifty years before they were born.

By the 1990s I was in possession of a large quantity of these old pictures. Also, by this time, my parents were dimming a little, and it actually occurred to me that I needed them to start labeling the old images. Well, we did sit down on a couple of occasions, but instead of methodically doing the work, we permitted ourselves to be entertained with a few stories that went with a few of the pictures, and the rest were set aside for a later date.

My father died in 1998, and the quantity of photos, not to mention other old documents, that emerged from his belongings after his death is a terrible waste of lost memories. We, his children, don't know who most of those people are and didn't know that most of those photos even existed.

In the early 2000s, after I had puzzled over many of the photos, I wrote to my father's sister, Virginia, in the Farmington area, by then in her eighties, and told her I needed her help with some old pictures. She wrote back and agreed to the idea, but added that she was always busy making pies for the church and watching her grandchildren, but surely we would have a good time some day and go through pictures.

Well, we didn't, and Aunt Ginny died at 84 in 2009. My mother, two months older than Ginny, had faded so much that she couldn't help with the pictures from her side of the family, and soon she didn't even know any of her own children. We had lost her contribution to the effort as well, even though she survived until 2017 and had reached 92.



By then I had already analyzed the two accompanying photos, without her help, and had published the original version of this article.

I have made an effort with the boxes of photographs, though. I now have a fairly extensive genealogy of the past several generations of my ancestors. And in many of the old photos, I do know at least one of the faces. By using some logic in the way you would solve a puzzle, I add possible names to the other faces and see whether it makes sense according to their apparent ages and the setting or period in the image. Once I have made sense of one photo, I will look for the same faces in another and then follow my suppositions through additional photos. If doing so reinforces my conclusions, I call it good.

And this is where it struck me that my generation has an even more urgent responsibility than my parents had. For I am old enough (born in 1950) that I not only knew many of the images but was also acquainted with some of the people themselves, who were born as far back as the 1860s, if they were still alive when I was a kid. And it struck me how much further back my mother could go, if her mind were still with her!

It's a responsibility I don't take lightly. But it is difficult to bring the task to the top of the list of things that must be attended to day by day. I am the last chance that a lot of these people among my ancestors will be positively identified. If they are not, then the pictures (quite a few tintypes among them) are useless and may as well be donated to a garage sale.

I have the same responsibility regarding the images I have taken with my own cameras over the years. Fortunately, modern photo-organizing programs on computers urge us to pay attention to that detail. But for my generation there is a double-whammy, for I have thousands of photos I took myself using film cameras. And, what's worse, one trunkful of a thousand of my own photos once sat in a flooded basement. Many of those pictures are now permanently stuck together. My only hope, if there are any important ones among them when I tear them apart, is to find the negatives and scan those.

I have that project under way as well. On a make-shift desk in the basement I have a spare scanner and an old computer, both pretty much dedicated to converting film negatives to digital images. The scanner produces astonishing images from 35mm negatives, and I get to be the first to resurrect a picture I took in the 1970s, when we were just starting a family and making a home of our own.

If I don't do it, though, it will be beyond my own children's knowledge and resources, not to mention available time, to take over the job. It's a job that I accept with enthusiasm.

first photo

My cousin in Ohio, Georgia (Hume) Johnston Fox, sent me a couple photos recently. I had never before seen either of them. She was certain that they were our ancestors, but there was no identification attached. I have a partial family tree, written by my mother, so I began to work on the pictures. One of Georgia's photos features 16 people posed for a group picture, the other depicts ten people in a similar formal pose.

If you're related to a Dershem or any of the other names that follow, you may find this interesting. If you're not related, then this will be worse than boring, so be forewarned!

I was able to puzzle out the first photo, below, because I instantly recognized my mother's father, Richard Ivan Miller, back row, second from right. I don't recall that I had ever seen a photo of my Dershem ancestors, but I surmised that the woman sitting before my grandfather is my grandmother, Ella May (Dershem) Miller, although I had only ever seen a couple of pictures of them both, taken much later in life. (I had also never seen them in person; both of my mother's parents died when she was a teenager.) The next guess,

since this is almost assuredly a family photo, was that it is a portrait of Ella May with her parents, siblings, their spouses, and children. Using the family history from my mother, I began attaching names to substantiate that theory.



This photo, then, taken in the spring of 1914, (April 12, Easter Sunday?), would show James Milton Dershem and Margret Effie Alice (Sunderland) Dershem (seated in front row, left)* with their six children and spouses and all their grandchildren. The three older children were married, the three younger ones were not. If this is indeed the explanation for the photo, then no one is missing and there are no extraneous people either (except the fellow in the straw hat on the left, around the corner of the house — he may be cropped out in some versions of the photo). The six Dershem children (with year of birth) were John 1881, Daniel Frank 1883, my grandmother Ella May 1884, then Hattie Blossom 1895, Byron Homer 1898, and Oliver Perry 1900. *(Yes Margret is how she spelled it.)

So here they are, with each one's year of birth, front row, left to right: Oliver Perry Dershem, born in August 1900 and shown here at 13, my great-grandfather James Milton Dershem 1861, Cleta Irene Dershem 1906, my great-grandmother Margret Effie Alice (Sunderland) Dershem 1862, Margaret Irene Miller 1908 (called Irene), Hattie Blossom Dershem 1895 (called Blossom) holding her nephew Bernard Ivan Miller 1913, Bernard's and Irene's mother and my grandmother Ella May (Dershem) Miller 1884. Back row, left to right: John Ebenezer Dershem 1881 holding Lawrence Melton Dershem 1911, Goldie Mae (Rabe) Dershem 1888, Daniel Frank Dershem 1883 holding James Cleon Dershem 1911, Ruth Velma (Ohm) Dershem 1889, my grandfather Richard Ivan Miller 1885 (called Ivan), and Byron Homer Dershem 1898.

Oliver Perry was known to my mother as Uncle Dutch. Daniel Frank is sometimes listed as Franklin. Cleta, in front, is daughter of John, left rear. Margaret Irene Miller was the oldest child of Richard Ivan Miller and Ella May (Dershem) Miller. Bernard Ivan Miller was their second child, after Margaret Irene. Bernard's year of birth has sometimes appeared as 1912, but directly from his daughter, Carol and from his funeral notice it's 29 December 1913, so since he is an infant a few months old in Blossom's lap, this must be the spring of 1914. If it is an Easter gathering, then the photograph can be dated to that weekend, 11-12 April 1914.

Richard Ivan Miller's father, Dan Miller (not in the photo), is written about in Kate Gardner's 1884 diary, which appears next in this volume. And for a haunting look at this subject from my father's side of the family, see the chapter, Mary Jane, Mary Jane.

second photo

This is another one that Georgia sent me at a different time. I began with the premise that this second photo, of the five couples, is older — I guessed at first maybe 10-15 years older, some time in the 1890s up to early 1900s. I say this mainly because of their clothes.

Anyone in this photo who also appears in the first photo would be younger in this one. The white-haired man is far older than the other four men, so I'd guess he is the father of the family and, if this is dated around 1900, he may have been born in the 1830s. Perhaps the other four men are his sons, or a couple of them are his sons and a couple of the women are his daughters. I started with James Milton Dershem, my great-grandfather whose family is gathered in the first photo above, and went back one more generation. If the old man is *his* father, John Rueben Dershem, born in 1838, then in 1900, at age 62, he had four living sons and three living daughters. Another son, Elijah, died at age 27 in November 1900, so if these are John Reuben's four sons, it would have been taken in the summer before Elijah died. But Jesse Glenwood Dershem, the youngest, was only 17 that summer. None of the men seated in the photo is that young, unless maybe the giant, who appears to be the youngest. I remember Uncle Jesse, and he was no giant.

Looking at their faces, the man in the middle could be James Milton Dershem, who was 39 in 1900, and the woman behind him could be his wife and my great-grandmother Margret Effie Alice (Sunderland) Dershem. They both appear in the first photo. And the young man standing off to the right side could be a youthful Jesse (not visible in the cropped version). So maybe this is John Rueben Dershem, the white-haired man, with his wife behind him, and his married children and their spouses, some time after 1900, (but not later than 1905, the year John Rueben and wife Louiza (Imler) Dershem both died). So let's say it's summer 1903. (Jesse wasn't married until 1907.) My great-grandfather James Milton Dershem was 42 in 1903. His sister Sarah Catherine (Sally) was 37 and, my mother says in her history of the family that she knows Sally was married but knows nothing about Sally's husband. Another sister, Emma Louisa, was 33 in 1903 and was married to a Miller but my mother's history says he was not related to her dad, Richard Ivan Miller (whose father came from Virginia by way of Pennsylvania, not Ohio). James's brother Sheldon Aaron (known as Shell) was 29 and was married. And James's sister, Missouri Mae Dershem (whom we all knew as Aunt Hattie) was never married.

The more I study this, the more I can accept the conclusion that this is a portrait of John Rueben Dershem with his wife and his married children, along with their spouses. It's the summer of 1901 to 1904, but I'll say it's 1903. And I'll say these are the people in the photo:



Left to right, the women are Sarah Catherine Dershem (married name?), Emma Louisa (Dershem) Miller (younger than Sally), my great-grandmother Margret Effie Alice (Sunderland) Dershem, my great-great-grandmother Louiza (Imler) Dershem, and Ollie (Harbert) Dershem, Shell's wife, who my mother says was burned to death in her home when Mom was about 10 (about 1935). I place the first two women in this sequence, Sarah on the far left, because Emma was younger than Sarah and, if they are standing behind their husbands, I assume the giant to be the younger of the two men on the left.

The men, left to right, then, are unknown husband of Sarah Catherine, the giant Oris D. Miller husband of Emma (whom my mother knew as Aunt Fid), my great-grandfather James Milton Dershem, my great-great-grandfather John Rueben Dershem, and Sheldon Aaron Dershem. These would have been all the married children of John and Louiza at the time. Four other children had died by this time including the aforementioned son Elijah who died in 1900. Jesse was 20 in 1903 and not married yet, and, as mentioned, Hattie never married.

The Aunt Hattie that I knew was John and Louiza's daughter Missouri Mae but called Hattie, born in 1877 and sister to my great-grandfather James Milton Dershem. She died in May 1953. I have pictures of myself at about age two with Hattie and my mother, and I remember going into her house with my parents after she died (the original Dershem family farmhouse) — the house being empty and cold inside. It was probably the late fall of the year, possibly even early in 1954. I know it's odd to have a clear memory of something that early in life, but it stands out sharply for me.

James, my great-grandfather, had a daughter, Hattie Blossom, born in 1895, who died in 1964. She was known as Aunt Blossom, married to Lewis Frysinger of Defiance, Ohio.

Mom's history says she had 16 children. (She's the one holding her sister's baby Bernard in the first photo.)

When I study the 1914 Dershem photo, the first one above, I can see the near resemblance of James and Margret to the ones I believe they are in the center of the 1903 photo. And the three men on the right in the 1903 photo, with the oldest in the middle of the three, all look enough alike to be father and sons. The other two men do not look like Dershems. But, to look at them, the two women standing behind those two men *could* be John Dershem's daughters.

Let's suppose that's all wrong about the second photo, that they are not my great-great-grandfather Dershem and his married children and spouses. That explanation fits, but let's say it's wrong. Then, who is it? I looked through the Imler, Sunderland, Miller, Little, Betts, Gardner, and Wagoner (Waggoner) lines and could not find a set of family members who would fit the pattern, and besides, all, by those other surnames who are my direct ancestors, would be much older than those depicted around 1900. It *could* be some side branch of the family, like maybe a whole bunch of Sunderland cousins the same ages as our Dershem great-grandparents. But why would such a photo as that be in my cousin's things, inherited from my mother's sister? I go back to the man in the middle of the 1903 photo who, even though he has a mustache and would be about 10 years younger in this photo than in the first, still strongly resembles the one identified as James Milton Dershem in the 16-member 1914 photo. If those two men are the same person, then I stand by my conclusions.

For a tale with touches of truth embellished with a lot of fiction, see the short story, *Racing the Light at Dershem's Corner*, in the collection, *Tales to Warm Your Mind*, published by Damn Yankee (DamnYankee.com).