

Someone asked me recently about an old picture, wondering if there was anyone in the photograph that I knew. I didn't recognize any of the young men in baseball uniforms, and there was nothing in the picture to indicate when it had been taken.

That made me think about the permanence, and yet, also the anonymity that such photographs provide. Captured in black and white for the ages, and yet, keeping the now long deceased forever young. Faces and demeanor suggesting all kinds of secrets that nobody will ever decipher. Fates as yet unmet. Futures uncertain.

On one level these old photos are interesting. Looking at them closely unlocks all kinds of knowledge about the times and customs. Very old pictures rarely showed people smiling. During some eras, nearly all men had beards or mustaches. Women's hairstyles or dress lengths and styles help us determine just when a photo was taken.

But, on the other hand, I find these old pictures of people I don't know disturbing. How did the photograph—a rather costly and special event in most families—come to be sold at a garage sale somewhere by folks who had no idea of the identity of the people involved? Did a family “die out” with nobody to pass on its lore and experiences? Or as time passed, did present generations just not care anymore?

I'd rather that old photographs be burned rather than discarded by garage sales or antique stores. When I think how interested we would be to have pictures of our ancestors, avenues by which we could spend countless evenings relating family stories, speculating on this one or that one, saying things like—“Well, we know where cousin X got that nose!” Or—“I never knew there were blonds on that side of the family.” Or—“Dad sure must have looked like his grandfather.”

We don't have a lot of old pictures in our family. The ones we do have are valued. In some cases, they seem to provide as much insight into the family past as a DNA test. Family traits are often visible in these old photos. The way Uncle Albert was sitting in the studio photo taken during World War I was not much different than the way he comported himself as an old man years later. Great-grandmother Benedicta Augustineson's reputation for sternness and drive was evident in the family picture taken soon after they arrived in America. Great-grandfather Lars Augustineson's demeanor in the same photo also showed his mild, more relaxed

attitude.

I don't know if my interpretation of family pictures is at all accurate. But, I do know that looking at these old photographs seems to forge a link with the past, a way of connecting with these ancestors I never saw or, perhaps, that I knew as much older people. And I'd hate to think that our family pictures were so little appreciated that they would end up in a garage sale.