



Are Your Family Memories Fading Away?

5 backup techniques for preserving your family photographs

The recent hurricane that hit New Orleans is probably the most tragic ‘natural disaster’ in U.S. history. While it is teaching many State and Federal agencies about future disaster preparedness, the tragedy offers some important lessons on a more personal level. Besides the need to get out of the path of a hurricane quickly, we need to make sure that our precious photographs including the ones of loved-ones are well preserved.

While most of us can’t imagine what it is like to have a loved-one go missing in a flood, it would be extremely heart breaking if we didn’t have their memory preserved in photographs. What about photographs of family members from previous generations? Sometimes we only have one copy of a photograph and if these are lost, we will lose an important connection to our past and to ourselves.

There are many things that you can do right now to preserve your photographs so that in case a disaster strikes, you will be able to both easily retrieve your photographs and to make sure that your family members won’t be forgotten. The backup strategies will be divided into No-brainer, Basic, Intermediate Hard Disk, High Level and Other Considerations and will work for either film-based or digital photographers.

No-brainer Backup

Most of us have now gotten a digital camera, but we still have many slides, negatives and old photographs from earlier in our lives or passed down to us from previous generations. If you are in this situation, the best thing to do now is to put all of them in archival quality slide, negative or film storage sleeves that have pre-punched holes. You can place these in a file drawer or you can put them in binders. Also, these old photographs should always be stored in an environment with a consistent temperature. Never put them in an attic or a damp basement.

The next step is to have the top 10-20% of them scanned into the computer and saved on a compact disc (CD). Unless you have plenty of money, it probably doesn’t make sense to scan everything when you consider that the price of scanning for each individual slide, negative or photograph will run about \$2.50. While you might be able to get a quantity discount, when you are talking about hundreds of scans, you are better served purchasing the scanner and doing it yourself. The best format for saved electronic files is TIFF (tagged image file format). Make sure you ask for this at the photo lab or service bureau. The TIFF format preserves the highest amount of data for later printing and cropping.

Basic Backup

From now on, you need to make it a habit to get a CD made at the time of slide or print developing at your photo lab. It will cost a little extra, but it will be worth it because you automatically will have a secondary backup source in addition to the original slides and negatives. If you are using a digital camera, make sure that you burn a CD on your home computer of the images you just captured. Don’t wait like most people and have hundreds of images on your memory card and then wonder when to back them up.

If you have too many images to fit on one CD, put them on a DVD (digital video disc) instead. A



DVD holds almost seven times as much data as a CD and most computers can access the files so that you can retrieve the data. For extra protection, store an exact copy of the photographs on DVDs or CDs at an off-site location like the in-laws house. If you lose your data on your personal computer or there is a flood at your home, you can always retrieve the extra copies of the photographs. Make sure that you take the backup copies of the CDs you made at the photo lab and store them off-site too.

Intermediate Hard Disk Backup

At some point, you are going to be staring at a stack of backup CDs or DVDs all the while improving your skills as a photographer. While you should be proud that you made the backup copies, it's going to be increasing more difficult to access the material on your discs especially if you save your files in the TIFF format. As I mentioned, the TIFF format allows you to have some of the highest amount of photographic information, but it will take about ten times the storage space of regular JPEG files.

By having an external hard disk, it's going to make it much easier for you to store all of your photographs on it and then burn a CD or DVD only once for your off-site needs. It is recommended that you purchase an external hard disk of at least 200GB (gigabytes). This may seem like an expensive hard disk, but the prices have come down for storage to the point where you can expect to pay less than \$1 per GB. LaCie is a good external hard disk company with great customer service. You can add additional hard disks as needed when your wallet and the number of photographs allows.

High Level Backup

Now that you have the idea of an external hard disk devoted to photographs down, you should be thinking about how you can automate the process. One of the best ways is to purchase two additional hard disks. You will keep the second hard disk at your main location and rotate the third hard disk on a regular basis to your offsite location. Here's a look on how this would work.

Your digital files would be stored on an External Backup Disk #1. A copy of all digital photographic files would also stored on an external backup disk #2 (called mirroring). Depending upon your backup software package, you can schedule the backups from Disk #1 to Disk #2 automatically. You would store another disk offsite on External backup disk #3. You would need to schedule a daily, weekly or a bi-monthly swap of disk #2 and disk #3, so that you would never be more than a few days away from accessing all of your photographs.

There are many software packages that allow you to implement the High Level scenario to take place without a lot of effort (i.e. it operates behind the scenes). The great thing about this scenario is that once a faster disk comes out, I simply migrate the data and retire the older hard disk. After I photograph for a client or do personal work either with a film or digital camera, I am also in the habit of always creating a CD or DVD.

A big challenge of putting data on a CD or a DVD is that the disk is only rated to last by the NIST (National Institutes of Standards and Technology) for about 25 years. However, even after just few years, some CDs can show signs of aging if not stored properly. This means that you need to think about redundancy with your photographic backups. If you are operating under the High Level



Backup Strategy, you will have an electronic copy of your files at your main place of work, you might have slides or negatives and then high-resolution copies of your files at an offsite location. You would be very well covered.

Other Considerations

However, if your in-laws' house which serves as your backup location isn't far enough away (the recommended distance for a backup location is 50-75 miles), there are a few sites on the Internet that can store your data. You simply select those files that are the most important and then upload your photographs. It's highly recommended that you have a high-speed connection (i.e. Cable or DSL) in order for you to upload the files relatively quickly. However, a few of the service bureaus will allow you to mail in your CD's or DVDs and they will upload the information for you. I recommend www.ibackup.com, which was rated as PC Magazine's 2004 Editor's Choice. For \$9.95 per month, you can backup 5GB of data that is the equivalent to the storage capacity of over seven CDs.

There are also photo-specific sites that allow you to display your images in an album format, but be careful and check the fine print. Some of the sites only allow your images to remain on the site for 90 days and they may only take JPEG files. The best sites are www.kodakgallery.com, www.shutterfly.com and www.snapfish.com.

Believe it or not, some people will take their digital files and print them for placement in a physical photographic album. In case their digital files and slides and negatives become damaged or destroyed, the thinking is that they can scan these photographs later. While I want to encourage people to share their photographs in as many ways possible, I don't recommend this as an effective backup strategy. Most printers that are used today contain dye-based inks and are not archival quality. If these photos are exposed to natural sunlight and are not stored in optimum environments, the images will turn orange and your family memories could just fade away. However, if you practice an effective backup strategy, you will be able to preserve your photographs for generations to come.

About Mark Sincevich

Mark Sincevich has been practicing photography for over 21 years, is a member of the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP), and is an instructor at the Washington School of Photography. He also has 13-year background in the high technology field where he became very familiar with backing up his data. His photography has been featured in numerous newspapers and magazines and he is frequently quoted in the media. Mark is also an active member of the National Speakers Association and regularly delivers professional speaking programs on photography, creativity and work/life balance. He is the author of three books including, "Snap: the ultimate guide to digital photography," and numerous articles. He can be contacted at 301-654-3010, or www.staashpress.com.