

# Picture This

## USING PHOTOGRAPHS TO STUDY THE PAST

### Overview

An old photograph provides a basis for discussion about life in the past, and demonstrates the value of photos as primary sources.

### Objectives

- Students will
- understand that photographs represent primary source material
  - recognize that photos record details about the past and can be used for interpretive and comparative purposes

### Subjects/Skills

- social studies, photographic arts
- observation, deduction, inference, comparison, interviewing

### Age Level

Grades 4—8

### Materials

- copies of the student worksheet
- old photos brought from home
- paper and pencil

### Time Required

Allow one hour to prepare for this activity and 1–2 class periods to complete it.

### Background

Photographs are a form of artistic expression and human record that modern people understand very well. They are used to capture peoples' lifestyles, special or historic events, candid activities, familial and social relations, artistic feelings, and even criminal deeds. Photographs of peoples who do not, or did not, keep written records some-

times provide a primary source of information about those cultures. A century ago, when having one's picture taken was a rare experience, people often posed with serious and formal expressions—creating the impression that society and people were a little dour.

For modern researchers who use photographs to glean details about the past, the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words," could not be more accurate. But despite their seeming objectivity, historic photos must be studied carefully and critically. While many scenes and events have been recorded because a photographer was "in the right place at the right time," more often photographs are, or have been, taken with purpose, forethought, and composition in mind. It is the photographer, through his or her positioning of the camera's eye, who defines a picture's content and determines what will be included or omitted in a scene.

Thus, when a photo is used as a primary source, it should be augmented by other information. Knowing who took the photo; why, when, and where it was taken; who requested it; and the identity of the subject(s) can shed additional light on the content and meaning of the image. Documents, artifacts, oral histories, and personal papers or records also can help to place a photograph into a larger pattern of events or behaviors and give it greater validity.

Historical archaeologists use old photographs in many ways. For example, by determining the earlier appearance of an area, including the landscape and structures, an archaeologist can anticipate and better interpret features found during an excavation. Photographic images also help to identify fragments of recovered objects that may appear intact in a photo.

Photographs are a particularly vivid teaching device for students because they provide views of the past for

people whose own history may be very short. They can provide a source of inquiry and explanation; and, of course, they serve a lasting purpose by stimulating the visual and mental senses.

The photo on page 7, taken in 1900 in Pensacola, Fla., portrays two people relaxing in rocking chairs, surrounded by the types of household artifacts found in many homes at the time. After analyzing the photo, students will discuss how the couple's turn-of-the-century lifestyle compares to scenes in their own family and to the observations of elders whom students have interviewed. They also will discuss how an old photograph might be useful to an archaeologist.

### Preparation

1. Several days before the activity, assign students two tasks to complete.

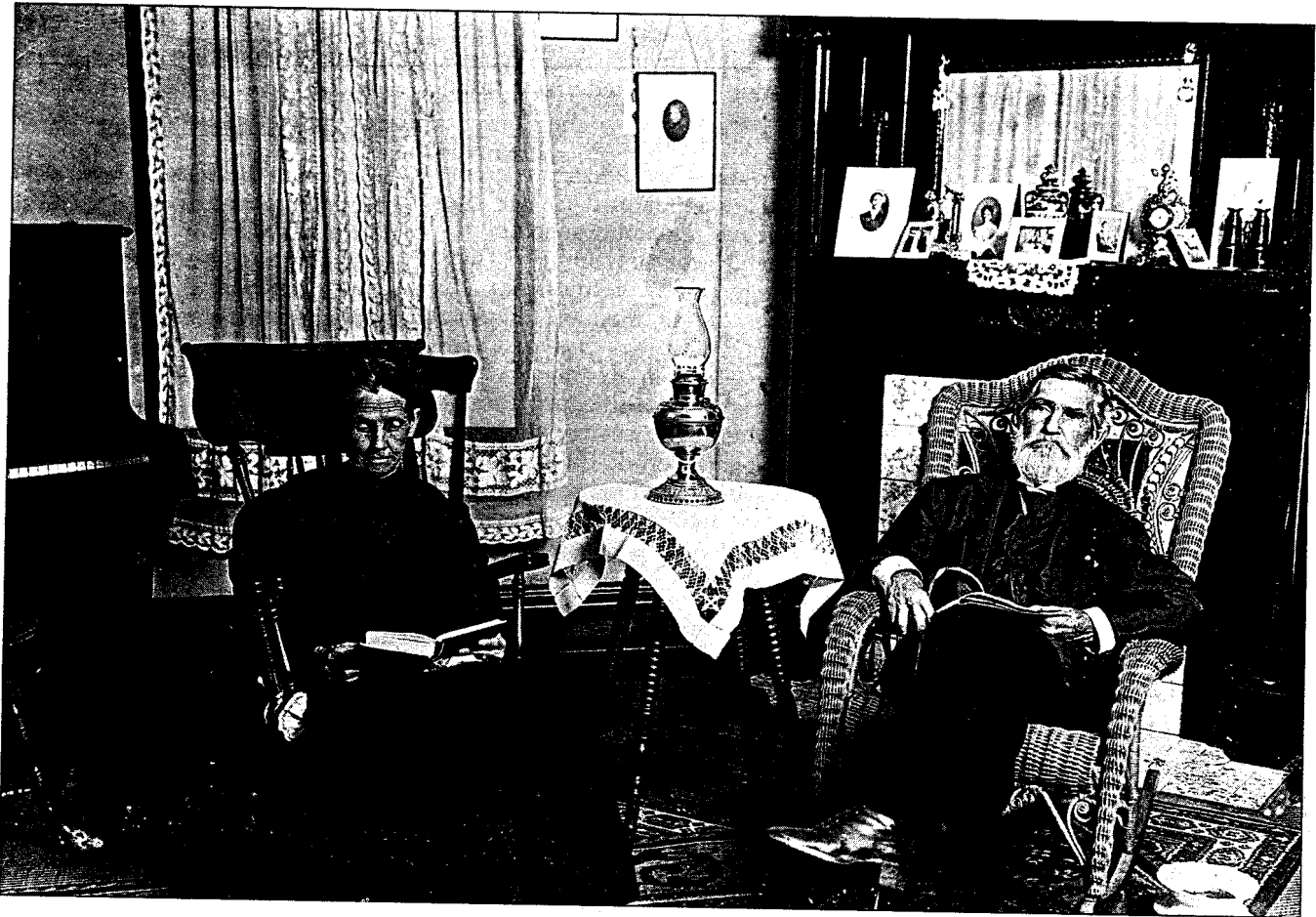
a. Ask them to talk to an elder relative or neighbor who has lived in the same area for many years and can describe some changes that he or she has witnessed over time. As a group, the class might develop two or three questions to ask the subjects. Students should make notes during or immediately after the conversation, and bring the notes to class for the activity.

b. Ask students to find an old family photo to bring to class on the day of the activity. The image can illustrate people, a place, or an event, but the scene should be as "unmodern" as possible. Students should know details about their picture.

2. Decide how students will be divided into two-person teams. Make one copy of the student worksheet (page 7) for each team.

3. The day before the activity, remind students to bring their photos and interview notes to class. Instruct them not to show their pictures to classmates.

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**Student Worksheet****Instructions**

The way that people live and the equipment that they use changes constantly over time. We can learn about people and activities of the past from old photographs. However, when we study these images, we need to remember that the photographer probably had a specific idea in mind when she or he took the picture. We have to ask ourselves these questions:

- *What does this photograph tell me?*
- *Why did the photographer take this picture?*
- *Is it a fair and accurate portrait of the past?*

Examine the photograph above and answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

**First Impressions**

1. What is your first impression about this photograph? What seems to be happening in the picture?
2. How would you describe the people (their age, clothing, expressions, relationship, economic status)?
3. Make a list of the objects in the photograph. Make another list of the kinds of technology that the people have or do not have (by today's standards).
4. When do you think the picture was taken (year, time of day)? Where was it taken? How can you tell?

**Drawing Conclusions**

1. Why do you think the photo was taken? Did the photographer have a message to share?
2. What does the picture tell you about the past?
3. What objects in the picture would survive over time?
4. What questions do you have about the photograph?
5. How could you get more information about the photograph and the time period in which it was taken?

