



The Kalamazoo Valley Heritage

October 2008

Vol. 33 No. 2

Digital Cameras and the Genealogist

By Linda Hull

At our September meeting, Wayne Loney and Jim Jackson gave a thorough presentation on how to use any digital camera to aid our research.

Wayne began with the positive reasons to do this:

1. It takes no paper, thus you don't have to stand in line at the copy machine in the library nor lug and organize boxes of copies.

2. Using a camera prevents mistakes because if you make an error, you simply shoot the page over again.

3. The process is not harmful to documents because they are not exposed to the harsh lights of copy machines or flash photography.

4. The process is essentially free as there is no film to develop or copies to buy. Jim said that he can take approximately 2 hours worth of pictures on one battery or he can use a battery charger and bypass the battery IF there is a place to plug it into the wall.

The only negatives were that occasionally libraries prohibit you from using this technique and that you may not use it at a county clerk's office where they sell the copies of vital records. Jim also said that a scanner is preferable in quality to a digital camera.

Wayne gave his "rules" for good photos:

1. Turn off the flash! You will be working with black print on nearly white paper so there is already a good contrast and you will be taking the picture in close proximity to the page.

2. Set the camera to the black and white mode so the camera isn't attempting to create color within the picture.

3. Find a chair and move the chair near a window to take advantage of the natural light.

4. Hold your elbows close to your body to keep the camera still. Place the document on the chair, hold the camera about your waist and snap the picture. You may wish to experiment between the normal and macro setting. Remember if the picture doesn't turn out as you wish, just retake it.

5. Take a picture of the title page and the spine of the book so that you have a record of your source.

Wayne also recommended that if the page doesn't fit in your viewfinder, you can turn the book and take the picture in landscape mode. For a large document or map, you may wish to photograph the entire page and then again in halves or quarters creating an overlap. By turning on the review feature of your camera, you can manipulate the telephoto and wide angle button to enable you to examine more closely a certain section of one picture. A tightly bound volume may need to be held by a second person to catch the inner edges of the page in your picture. Cemetery pictures should be taken at sunrise or sunset and always in black and white.

Using your camera in conjunction with an overhead type projector or microfilm reader, works well. It works best if you place a manila folder (with a matte finish) on the bed of the microfilm reader and take a photo of the image on the folder. The folder cuts down the glare and works great with census images.

Your goal is not to print these as photos but to download these pages onto a memory stick so that you can read them on your computer and perhaps print out selected pages.

Once the pages are loaded onto your computer, you can use a product such as Picasa to do fundamental editing; enhancing the light, rotating the image, etc.

Jim Jackson gave a visual presentation using his laptop. He showed many examples of the specific-use images that he and Wayne had discussed. He showed slides of portable tripods both manufactured and home-made.

Continued on next page

He demonstrated how he created his own tripod for close-up work by turning his commercially-made one upside down. Jim photographs whole books by using the tripod to hold the camera which allows him to turn pages and operate the shutter. He first photographs all of the odd pages in a book and then goes back and does all the even pages.

He then took us one step further as he demonstrated an OCR (Optical Character Recognition) piece of software. This takes the image of the page from your digital camera and converts that into type in your word processor so that you can import passages or pages to your genealogical software. He cautions that many of these programs may change the font from the original and make mistakes. For instance an "r" next to an "n" might become an "m" in your new document.

The program left everyone with something they could take away at their own level of understanding. It was a great way to kick off the new genealogical year!

REPRINT