



*What you see is not always what you get. There may be more. That's what happened when the digital restoration of an old family photo disclosed handwriting on the faded print. The 1895 photo showed an elderly man holding a baby (right). The restoration revealed a handwritten speech bubble from the baby's mouth, with the words, "Granpa in care of me." Even knowing the writing is there, I still cannot see it on the original, even with magnification.*

*Just as stunning was the restoration of an ambrotype, a painting on glass circa 1855 (far right). From no more than a black shadow, digitizing defined the sweet features of a child and permanently preserved the image.*

# BEFORE MY VERY

# Eyes

TRANSFORMING FADED MEMORIES INTO VIVID REALITIES

BY SANDRA HARGREAVES LUEBKING, FUGA

**T**HE TIMING WAS PERFECT. When *Ancestry Magazine* asked me to evaluate two companies that digitize and restore photographs and documents, I was toe-deep in a personal commitment to preserve my family history in a form that would be appreciated by others. But for various reasons, perhaps feeling overwhelmed by the project or waiting for that big chunk of time to do it properly, I hadn't gotten very far.

Let me back up. By doing it “properly,” I mean preserving my old photos, negatives, movie film, and documents in high-resolution, electronic file formats. Whether I did it myself or had an outside company tackle the job, the original item would need to be scanned, the image captured in a digital format, and the file saved to a CD, DVD, or some other storage medium. Some images would require restoration, and others I might want to resize or clean up. I'd want

to be sure I could access any of the images at any time so I could add them to a book or a card, incorporate them into family research software, or just make and share copies.

Thanks to the help of dear friends, I had started my digitization project, but I still had only a handful of images digitized. Truth be told, it was slow going—my time and energy were limited. I quickly realized that to do it myself and do it right, I would need new software and an upgraded scanner. Then *Ancestry Magazine* came knocking. Now I finally had the chance to do more.





**GREEN BE GONE:**  
Restoration of an old photo removed an ugly green hue that had crept into the image over time.



## Services

I was asked to look at two different types of preservation/restoration services with the help of a pair of companies: Hollywood FotoFix and ScanCafe.

### My Job — ScanCafe

I chose 96 items to send to ScanCafe <[www.scancafe.com](http://www.scancafe.com)> for digitizing. First, I divided them into seven family groups. ScanCafe doesn't require sorting—I chose to do this for my own benefit. I set up a page for each group, numbering and briefly describing each item to help keep images together in the electronic files. This would also give ScanCafe the copy sequence. I created my own form with space for special notes; that way, for example, I could request that an image be enlarged. It also served as a complete record of the box's contents.

I selected a variety of items for ScanCafe. In addition to photographs spanning from 1860 to 1990, the box included a 1960 newspaper story about selling a century-old family farm, a 1903 torn and discolored baptism record, and a 1910 school photograph on heavy cardboard that had been ripped in half. The oddest items—and ones that proved challenging—were 13 tiny negatives, some more than 80 years old. Faded color photographs (including some Polaroids) and two tintypes rounded out the package. I also sent 120 slides in a carousel with a request they be made into a DVD.

### Hollywood FotoFix

For Hollywood FotoFix, I started by going to the company's website <[www.hollywoodfotofix.com](http://www.hollywoodfotofix.com)> and entering my zipcode to find the nearest location—a local Wolf Camera had self-serve kiosks. Store manager Darien Belluomini assured me my eight photos would leave my hands only for placement on the scanner. I had selected an ambrotype; an 1895 faded cardstock; a tintype; a 1900s

**Hollywood FotoFix** — Drop-off restoration service available via local camera stores throughout the country. Some locations feature while-you-wait fixes, although most restoration projects take a few weeks. Hollywood FotoFix creates an electronic copy of the damaged photo and restores that electronic version. Services available range from fixing scratches and restoring color to removing unwanted images (even unwanted people and backgrounds). The original photo remains intact and is returned to the customer unchanged, along with a printed copy of the restored image.

**ScanCafe** — Mail-in digitizing service. The customer initiates the order online and follows instructions, which include putting all photos, slides, or negatives in a box—no sorting required—and printing out a mailing label using a choice of carriers. Photos are scanned and uploaded to a website for customer review; the customer determines which photos will be returned in digital format and only pays for the photos he or she wants. All original photos and a CD of scanned photos are returned to customer a short time later. Restoration services may also be included.

10 x 16 wedding photo; two cardstock photos—one faded (1871) and one heavily creased (1860); a daguerreotype that could not be removed from its case; and a rapidly fading outdoor camera shot of 4-year-old me in a ballet line. Each of these was scanned and electronically transmitted to the restoration shop in another state. I was in and out of the store in about 65 minutes—with my original photos in my hands.

### The Return — Hollywood FotoFix

Before placing the images on the scanner, Darien was careful to wipe the bed with a soft cloth, the type used to clean eyeglasses. He also dusted each image before putting it on the scanner. At his suggestion, we selected “general restoration,” then added typed instructions. For example, we asked that all but one child in the 1950s picture be removed. For the others, we chose black and white over sepia tones to get the most detail (we could always go back to sepia later).

Four of the restorations were returned within a week. Each image came on its own CD with two prints in nice folders. The detail was stunning. My remaining four photos, a bit more challenging, were back an additional week later.

### ScanCafe

In my Spensley family folder were 24 images that told a story of three generations. Photos of my immigrant great-grandfather were followed by those of his daughter and her children. The chronology ends with several shots of my dad in 1981, viewing the Yorkshire birthplace of his immigrant ancestor, Mason Spensley.

Each of the seven groupings that I sent to ScanCafe was enclosed in a separate plastic bag along with a copy of the item list. A cover letter gave



**ONE PHOTO THREE WAYS:** The author's ballet photo had yellowed through the years. ScanCafe retouched the color (page 40). Hollywood FotoFix dabbled with the image to pull out Sandra as a solo dancer (right).



**NEW LOOK AT OLD FORMATS:** Even tintypes and other old formats can be restored. This extra-precise image was pulled from a tintype that had blackened with age.



**REUNITED:** An old school photo that had fallen apart was put back together again.



an overall count and general instructions, plus my contact information.

At ScanCafe.com, I received clear instructions for mailing the package. I opened an account, printed out the UPS labels, and paid shipping and an estimated portion of the cost by credit card. A link to the UPS site told me where the closest store was. There were some confusing elements to the ordering process—were these negatives 36mm or 16mm? But the instructions assured me that this was only an estimate; it didn't have to be totally accurate on count or type. Good thing, because I repacked the box at least twelve times, adding some “must-do” photos right up until the sealing tape went on. The UPS tracking system allows for door-to-door surveillance, so I always knew where my package was in transit.

The process took a month from start to finish. I mailed the package on 28 February, and all contents were returned 27 March along with the CD holding seven family files and a DVD of the slides.

ScanCafe did free basic color corrections—they corrected a nasty green hue that had tainted some 30-year-old negatives, making the restorations bright and clear. They scanned at 600 dpi for photos and 3,000 dpi for slides and negatives.

Before final processing, I was able to review my digital images online and make corrections (like turning an image on its side). I could delete up to 50 percent of the images I had sent—and I wouldn't be charged for images I deleted. I could also change the order or location of my images if I wanted.



**A FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS:** From Sandra's Spensley family file is this now-restored photo (right) of her dad in the path of his family's immigrant ancestor.

## Remorse or Rejoice?

When it was all over, I was delighted with both services. Still, when it all started, I had my reservations. Hollywood FotoFix's services are appealing—their work was flawless and professional, and I didn't have to let go of an important heirloom to have it restored. But \$50 per image, regardless of the amount of restoration required, can still seem steep.

I should have had the same worries about sending images to ScanCafe, but because their Website was so professional and reassuring, I felt perfectly secure trusting them with 96 personal items. Their pricing was comfortable—19

cents per negative, 24 cents per slide, 27 cents per photograph. I appreciated the ability to cancel items before finalizing my order; the few photos I sent that I decided later I really didn't want digitized, I didn't have to pay for.

I now tell everyone there is no excuse for not digitizing your family memorabilia. Cost, process, availability, and outcome make this the most practical way to preserve your images. Do it now—you will absolutely get more than you expect.

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## Finding Homes for Priceless Pieces of History

By Dara Blanchette

You've done the work—but what will become of it? When no one in the family decides to pick up where you're leaving off, consider donating it instead.

"The first, best step is to identify the local historical society in the area where the artifacts are from," says Curt Witcher, manager of the Genealogy Center at the Allen County Public Library. Local libraries can help you find historical societies anywhere in North America and beyond. Print and online direc-

tories can be useful, too. More specialized historical societies that focus on local railroad history, canal and river history, mining, or other topics may also be interested in your artifacts. And don't forget state historical societies and state museums.

Most institutions will take "published family works, including family histories, transcribed diaries, and histories of a family as part of a church or local community," Witcher says. Other sought-after items include letters,

diaries, photographs, tools, and uniforms and other period clothing.

"Any item that is authentic can be considered for donation," Witcher notes. The more information you can provide about the item, the better. Written histories detailing who owned the item, date of creation, and any other data that puts it in its historical context are appreciated.