

# A Snapshot in Time: How to Study a Photo

By David J. Walbert \*

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 48: 2 (spring 2009).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

Photographs from the past can teach us about important events and help us solve great mysteries, but some of the most interesting images show people doing everyday things. They're the kind of photographs that you might find in old albums or in your grandparents' attic, and they reveal details of life that we might never have thought to ask about.

The photograph below comes from the North Carolina State Archives. The label provided by the archives reads only "From the Dunn Area (Lewis White Studio) Photograph Collection." This fascinating picture shows a world that is in some ways quite different from ours—and in other ways very similar.



## Five Questions

To find out what's going on in this photograph, we'll ask *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*—five questions that you're probably used to asking. The key is to start with what you know, or with the question that seems easiest to answer. If you found an old photograph of your grandparents, for example, you would know who, and you could then start from that knowledge

to ask the other questions. In this case, we'll start with where.

**Where?** We know the photograph was taken in Dunn, so we are looking at a scene from a small town in a rural part of the state's Piedmont. Let's consider the *setting*, or the specific place where the photograph was taken. Take in every detail you can, because like a crime scene investigator gathering clues, you never know what might turn out to be important.

What kind of place do you think this might be? At left sits a counter. We cannot see what the man behind the counter is doing, but we do notice large glass containers with something dark inside, and what appear to be stacks of paper cups. This counter looks like a soda fountain—the old kind of soda fountain where a “soda jerk” stood behind the counter and mixed syrups, carbonated water, ice cream, and other ingredients for each customer. Underneath the counter, closer to the front of the photograph, lie boxes of candy. The flat, rectangular ones with dark wrappers and light-colored blockish lettering resemble Hershey bars. In front of the counter stands a wire bin of potatoes. (Some of these items also give us clues about *when* the photograph was taken. We'll look at those later.)

At the right, along the wall, we see glass-doored cabinets holding small boxes, cans, and jars. On top of the cabinets are cardboard advertisements for Schlitz beer, Old Gold cigarettes, Tums (look closely; that one has fallen down), and a few other products whose names I can't read. On a lower cabinet in the middle, note a display of Goody's headache powders.

Finally, if you look closely at the back wall, right in the middle, you can just make out the word PRESCRIPTIONS. The cabinets along the right wall must hold medicines, which a druggist would have to get for customers. Drugstores used to have soda fountains, too. So this must be a drugstore.

**Who?** Now let's look at the people in the photo. We don't know who, exactly, they are, but we can make some general observations. They're all men and boys, and they all seem to be white—no women, no girls, no African Americans. Most of the boys are wearing overalls, and only one has on shoes, so you might guess that they are farm boys. But the men are not dressed like farmers. One is wearing a tie. Maybe he is a businessman, on break from work. The other two men have on casual clothes but fancy caps.

**What?** What are the people in the photo doing? The first thing I notice is that nearly all of them are facing the camera. They know they're being photo-graphed. They're posing.

What were they doing when the photographer interrupted them? The man at the far right is sitting down. We cannot see what he's sitting on, but the way he's sitting suggests that he's in a booth, leaning on a table. Maybe he was eating lunch or drinking a soda. One of the boys stands at the counter getting a soda or some candy, and another is reaching for something on a display rack. But because everyone has stopped to look at the camera, we cannot tell what most of them have been doing.

**When?** What clues might tell us when this photograph was taken? First, note that most of the boys are barefoot, and some of the men are wearing straw hats. So this must be summer.

Guessing a year is trickier and takes some experience or research. The bare feet tell us that this is a pretty old picture, taken at a time when boys walked around in summer without shoes and “no shirt, no shoes, no service” wasn’t a sign posted on many business doors! Soda fountains like the one shown were most common from the 1930s to the 1950s. The man standing at the right of the photo is wearing what appears to be a straw hat with a wide band, a style of hat I have seen in photographs and movies from the Great De-pression era.

The products that I can identify have been around for a long time and still exist today, but the advertisements look like ads created in the 1930s that are available on the Internet. I even did a little research on when paper cups were first sold and learned that they became common in the 1920s. Finally, by the early 1940s, during World War II, I would expect the young man standing with the group of boys to be in the military.

So my educated guess is that this photograph was taken sometime in the 1930s.

**Why?** Why was this photograph taken? Why are these people here in this place? These are questions that we cannot answer for certain. We’re left to wonder.

I wonder, first, why this group of boys was in the store. It seems like too much of a coincidence that all these boys of the same age were there at the same time. Were they there as a group? Were they with the man in the white shirt and cap standing behind them? If so, what was his role? You might have some ideas, and your guess is as good as mine. Why might a scene like this take place today?

### **A Moment in Time**

As interesting as photographs can be, all they show us is a single moment. That one moment may have been very different from the moments before and after it. That was even more true decades ago. Today, many of us walk around with digital cameras in our pockets, taking pictures of everything we see, e-mailing them, and putting them on the Internet. In the 1930s cameras were big and expensive, and developing film cost money. Few people owned cameras, except for journalists and other professional photographers, and those who did couldn’t afford to waste film.

We can assume this photographer took time to set up the shot carefully, giving his (or her) subjects time to pose. Most people had their pictures taken only rarely, so when they did, it became a big event. That’s probably why the men and boys in this picture are looking seriously at the camera, without smiling. So although it looks as though no one here is having any fun, we don’t know what was going on right before the photographer arrived.

Not knowing what happened before or after the photograph limits what it can tell us about the past. For example, we might guess that there are no African Americans in the picture because this was the Jim Crow era, when segregation might have prevented blacks from being served at this soda fountain. We could also guess that there are no women here because in the 1930s they

were all at home or on the farm working. Then again, we do not know who walked in the door five minutes later—or who was standing just outside the frame, or the area that the photographer chose to include!

In the end, there may no way to know who these people were, exactly what they were doing, or why the photographer took their picture. Of course, there are ways you could try to find out more. Someone still living in Dunn might recognize one of the people, for example. You could read old newspapers to look for advertisements for the Lewis White Studio or local drugstores.

Even if we can't learn any more, though, we've still learned a lot. It may be that the most interesting thing about photographs like this one is what we *don't* know, and what we're inspired to wonder about.

\*At the time of this article's publication, David J. Walbert was serving as the editorial and Web director for LEARN NC at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A historian, he was busy editing *North Carolina: A Digital History*, an online textbook based on primary sources and multimedia.