

Ashes to ashes, bits to bits

By Bruce A. Love

There is a saying, "nothing lasts forever." However, many of us still try to prevent the inevitable. We search for a fountain of youth, much like the Spanish explorer, Ponce de Leon, and hope that we discover a way to preserve the things we value.

Recent technology has given us new tools that offer hope for eternal life for our most treasured belongings. Faded photographs seem destined to become relics of the past as digital photography soars in popularity. Shoeboxes of photos, negatives, super 8s, and other old medias are being replaced by CD-ROMs, DVDs, and hard drives. Have we finally discovered the key to eternal life for our recorded memories?

Most of what is on my computer probably won't be of much importance 10 years from now. However, there are a few things, such as family photographs, sound recordings, and videos that I would like to preserve for future generations. If you are a family historian, or just want to pass things down to future generations, you will want to take steps to ensure that these things survive the test of time. Scanning old photographs, letters, and documents may help you accomplish this task.

In a previous column, we examined the process of scanning, enhancing, and storing old photographs. We have also discussed genealogical programs. However, the long-term archiving of this irreplaceable data must also be a very high priority. One recommendation is to place photographs and other vital files on archival quality disks, store them in archival cases, and distribute copies to as many family members as possible. Remember the saying; "don't put all your eggs in one basket."

Even with all the redundant backups, the life of your digitized data still has limitations. Storage capabilities diminish over time, and storage medias become obsolete. Consider the history of musical recording medias. Throughout history, music has been recorded to

wax cylinders, ceramic platters, vinyl disks, 8-track tapes, cassette tapes, and CDs, to name a few. If you had a favorite song perfectly preserved on 8-track tape, it would be very difficult to access with modern technology. Likewise, we do not know what storage devices will be like 10 years from now, let alone when our great grandchildren want to see our pictures!

To completely avoid the threat of damaged storage medias and obsolete storage devices, you might want to transfer important data to an online backup service. These services charge a monthly fee based upon the amount of storage space used. One nice feature about these services is that it doesn't matter what your service provider stores your data on, since they will continually update and transfer (migrate) your data to new medias as technology changes. These service providers also make frequent backups of your data, and store these backups in another location. This means that you will never lose everything even in an environmental disaster.

If you use all of these preventative measures, your data may still become inaccessible if the original program that generated the file (i.e. MS-Word) is not stored with the data. This is because programs used 100 years from now may not accept the formats used today.

So, what are we to do if we want our data and pictures to last forever? First, print important documents and digitized photographs on archival grade paper. If all else fails, this provides a hard copy of your files, which your future generations will appreciate. Next, periodically access data files using the latest programs, and save them in the latest formats to the newest storage medias. This will ensure that your program files evolve with software and hardware changes. Consider using an online backup service to safeguard your data. Finally, make sure your heirs are trained to follow these same procedures. In this way, the digital fountain of youth just may keep your records alive forever!

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