



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

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## Sources – photographs

Photographs are a valuable source for family history. Both photos held by family members and those found in library, archive and museum collections can provide important research clues and help personalise your family history search.

Unfortunately many old photographs are not labelled so it is difficult to work out who is in the photo or when and where it was taken. Used together with your other research, however, you might be able to figure out the people and places.

### Personal and family photos

When you start family history research, one of the first things you should look for is old photographs. Make a copy by scanning the photo so that you can make printouts to use while you're researching and keep the original safe at home. This will also ensure that you have a digital copy if ever the original is lost.

Always label who is in photographs in your own collections, if you know. Do it in soft pencil on the back or on a separate piece of paper kept with them. Never use pen.

When you visit relatives, particularly older family members, take the photographs along and ask if they can identify the people or places.

Your relatives might also have copies of old family photographs you haven't seen before. Ask to borrow the photographs, get a copy made and return the original. Or you can take a photo of the photo if they are reluctant to part with it.

Ask your family members about the photos they have – the names of the people in them, when and where the photo was taken and what was happening.

You might consider making copies of family photographs available to your local keeping place and/or to AIATSIS.

### Getting information from photographs

Identifying people, places and events in old family photographs can be difficult. But the images themselves can provide clues:

- The technology of photography has changed over time, and the type of photograph can help date it to a particular period – for example, small black and white 'snapshot' photographs usually date from the early 20th century.



- If the photograph is a studio style photograph and the name of the photographer or a studio is written on the front or the back, you might be able to work out the place and approximate date it was taken – start by searching for the photographer’s name in Trove digitised newspapers.
- Look closely at the photograph to see if there are any signs, shop names, street names or distinctive buildings in it – a search of Trove digitised newspapers might help identify the location.
- Pay attention to hairstyles and the clothes people are wearing in the photograph, especially women, as this can help you date the photograph. If there are any vehicles in the photograph the style and make of them can also help in dating a photograph
- If your family lived on a particular mission, reserve or station, see if you can locate other photographs of that place and compare the landscape, buildings and even people to see if they match.

You can find lots of other tips and hints online – do a Google search for ‘dating family photos’. There are also a number of books about old family photos, such as *Identifying and dating old family photographs* by Graham Jaunay (Adelaide Proformat, 2014).

## Photographs in library, archive and museum collections

Many library, archive and museum collections around Australia contain important photographic collections relating to Aboriginal people.

While the photographs may have been taken by non-Indigenous people for postcards, by travellers or by scientists, anthropologists and other researchers, they remain a valuable record of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their histories and cultures.

Even if these collections do not hold photographs of your family members, they might contain images of the places they lived.

### AIATSIS

The AIATSIS Pictorial Collection contains around 650,000 photographs relating to Indigenous Australia, dating from the late 1800s to the present day. More than 90 per cent of the collection is unique material not held elsewhere and it is the world’s most comprehensive photographic record of Australia’s Indigenous peoples. You can search photo captions online in the Mura catalogue. Search Mura® for photographs: [catalogue.aiatsis.gov.au](http://catalogue.aiatsis.gov.au)

Some of the photos in the collection have been digitised. These can only be searched and printed at the AIATSIS reading room in Canberra. However if you find a photo caption via your Mura search that might relate to your research, you can contact AIATSIS to arrange for a digital copy or printed copy to be made for you.

AIATISIS has also digitised the *Dawn* and *New Dawn* magazine. This was printed by the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board from 1935 to 1965 and contains many photographs related to New South Wales Aboriginal people. All issues are available online and the magazine is indexed in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Biographical Index (ABI). <http://aiatsis.gov.au/publications/products/dawn-and-new-dawn-1952-1975-mazagine-aboriginal-people-new-south-wales>

### **Tindale collection – South Australian Museum**

Photographs of Aboriginal people make up a significant part of the Tindale collection held by the South Australian Museum. See Sources: Tindale genealogies for more information on where to access them.

### **Trove – National Library of Australia**

Other collections of photographs of Aboriginal people are held in institutions such as the National Archives of Australia, state archives, the National Library of Australia, state libraries, non-government/church archives, museums and local historical societies.

You can search for images in many Australian and overseas collections through the [Pictures, photos, objects](#) tab on Trove.

Use search terms such as 'Aboriginal' or 'Aborigine' combined with a place name (for example, 'Aboriginal Dubbo' or Aboriginal AND Dubbo) or search using the name of a mission, reserve or station (for example, 'Ernabella'). You are less likely to find relevant photographs searching by people's names but it might be worth a try. For example a search for Aboriginal AND Wilson finds photos of people with the surname Wilson as well as Wilson as the name of a street and a river.

### **Offensive language**

Photographs held in Libraries, museums and archives often include offensive and racist language in the captions. Historical photographs themselves may be offensive and distressing because they reveal the ways in which Aboriginal people were treated. In addition, some photographers used offensive backdrops and put people into costumes that fit current stereotypes. Sometimes people were 'paid' for posing in such photographs with valuable goods such as food or tobacco.