

Digitizing Your Slides

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When people find out I am a serious amateur photographer, one of the most common questions I get is along the lines of “I have a shelf full of slides from years of raising a family and travels to all parts of the world. Nobody looks at slides any more. How can I convert them to digital picture files?”

I have my own shelf of that kind, and last spring I finally got around to digitizing it. My experiences may help others facing the same task.

You could send all the slides to one of the commercial services. I have never dealt with any of them, so I can not help if you want to do that. I'm told that it is expensive, and the quality is variable. My only advice would be to try a small order first, to be sure you are satisfied with the results.

If you are going to do it yourself, you have four options:

1. Use one of the cheap copiers that are currently advertised for \$65 to \$100 or so.
2. Use a flatbed scanner with a transparency illuminator
3. Use a specialized slide scanner
4. Use a bellows and slide holder on your digital SLR

I'll concentrate on the first two options. I have never owned or used a slide scanner.

Traditionally, they have been fairly expensive and I never had enough use for one to justify the \$500 or so cost. They should do an excellent job. In recent years, some cheaper slide scanners have come on the market. I've heard mixed comments about them. I own and have used a bellows and slide holder, which I can fit on my digital SLR, but for reasons I won't go into here, I do not think that's a good option for a mass conversion job.

The cheap copiers have hit the market in the last couple of years. Inside, they seem to be a small, fixed focus digital camera with a slide carrier and an illuminator. The one I tried came with a very basic photo program that would control the copier and let you file the slides.

I chose to try the cheap copier in the hope that it would speed up the conversion process. I hoped that it would do a good job of making copies, and that I could load it and work through the slides quickly and easily. It was disappointing in all respects. The slide carrier was hard to open, and when it was loaded you had to push it through the copier against continuous friction. There were no detents to help you position the slides. The resulting copies were contrasty and the color balance was poor. I returned the copier to the New York photo store where I had bought it by mail. They took it back with no problem and refunded my money.

At that point, I went to the technology I already had, a flatbed scanner. Will your scanner work? It depends. You must have a way to shine light through the slide. Scanners with a simple, opaque platen on the top will not work. A new scanner with an illuminator can be had for \$150 to \$200.

I have owned an Epson 2450 flatbed scanner for a number of years. (The model is no longer made, but other models have superceded it at less cost.) It works well for scanning slides using its manual, one-at-a-time settings, but I had not been happy in the past with the automatic mode, where you load up four slides and go off to let the copier do the job. Given my experience with the cheap copier, I tried the automatic mode again, and decided that for this use, it worked fine. The resulting images were far better than those from the cheap copier, in both contrast and color balance. That became my production method.

Dust is a nuisance and you *will* have trouble with dust! Get a can of “canned air” and use it liberally and often. You may also find that your scanner comes with a program, such as Digital Ice, that will digitally eliminate some of the dust from your scans.

You will almost certainly find that you need to touch up some of the images, and you need some sort of photo editing software to do that. My standard recommendation for people who plan to buy something is Photoshop Elements. It probably will do everything you want to do, and it much less expense than Photoshop. But first, try whatever you own. If it doesn't work, see if one of the free programs, like Picasa, will do the job you need done.

Another problem you are likely to face is faded images. Kodachrome was the old standby, and it has been vary stable. I have 75-year-old family movies taken on Kodachrome. The splices have dried out, but the images are still very good. Your Kodachrome slides probably will not present problems unless they have been stored poorly and things like mildew are a problem.

Back in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, though, I used a lot of Ektachrome, 3M color film and other brands. Kodachrome was still ASA 25 and it helped to have faster film. Besides, I was a graduate student and later a new father, and every penny counted. That film has faded, some of it so badly there is no point trying to restore it. Much of it can be converted quickly to black and white and retains much of the information and most of the charm of our kids when they were young. That is my recommendation. For a few especially treasured images, you may want to try to restore the color. I did so with reasonable success on one picture of my father and my aunt, but it took me an hour of work. Not feasible for a whole tray of slides, even for a retiree!

As an aside, Kodak recently announced that they are discontinuing Kodachrome. That may be a major loss for future generations, who will not have even the somewhat faded and stained black & white images that we now have of our 19th Century ancestors. Digitize everything you can, make multiple backups and send them to your children and siblings, and then hope for the best. But don't throw away the Kodachromes. They may outlast everything else.

As should be clear from the description above, digitizing your slides will not be a purely mechanical, put-it-in-the-machine-and-make-a file process. Many slides will need some attention

to make a good digital image. That means you should think about triaging your slide collection:

1. Some slides are in good shape and you and your descendants will want to look at them. Some may even be of interest for historical purposes. Digitize those.
2. Some slides are in good shape, but you haven't looked at them in 25 years, and your kids won't be interested. Those pictures of your 1960's trips to the National Parks may be in that group, though the ones of your youngest child in front of Old Faithful may be of value. Most are not worth the time it will take to digitize them.
3. Some are faded. Here, you need to decide which of the two categories above they would fit into if they were good. For those in category 1, consider scanning and converting them to black and white. If they are really valuable to you, see if you can restore the color. Some will be too far gone for either of those approaches to work.

When you get your pictures into digital form, find a way to be sure they don't disappear the next time your hard disk dies. Back them up! One good idea is to burn them to CD's and send those to your children. And don't forget those prints that you have around. If you have old black and white prints, perhaps of your grandparents and great grandparents, scan those and include them on a CD, so they won't be lost to your descendants if you have a fire or flood (or move again!). If you have early color prints, they are fading, too. Rescue them, if you can, by scanning them before they fade more. And PLEASE find a way to label everything. A picture of two people from the 1950's will be of little use to your descendants in 2050 if they don't know who it is! One simple way is to number the files on the CD, and include a list on the same CD. If you know how, access the EXIF files with the pictures and include the label there. I did CD's of grandparents for our children by putting a caption at the bottom of every picture, using Photoshop. Since CD's fade, I also keep all my pictures backed up on external hard disks.

Happy scanning!