Restoring Old Photographs

—by Gillian Newson

While you may never want to alter that original 1870's photograph of your great great Aunt Barbara, you can (and should) have a negative and an extra print made of it just for safe keeping. Photographs can become damaged over time: they can fade because of improper development or exposure to sunlight, images can be destroyed because of mildew, and photographs can develop tears, cracks, and creases even with the best of handling. In fact, the original photograph may never have been very good to begin with. In the past, photo restoration and retouching may have required a lot of specialized and expensive equipment, and years of experience. Today, if you have a Macintosh, an image processing program like Aldus Digital Darkroom, and a little time, you can duplicate anything a skilled photographer can do in a traditional darkroom…and then some.

Tom Reid, owner and operator of Photocraft in San Diego, California, had never considered a Macintosh for photo retouching, but after seeing a demo of Digital Darkroom, he was convinced it was the system he needed. He purchased a Mac II with 8Mb of memory, a large gray scale monitor, and a scanner to bring the original photographs into the Mac.

The original photograph dates from the late 1800's and shows extensive cracking, multiple tears, and some loss of image detail. The restoration took almost eight hours, but most photos can be repaired in under an hour.

Reid started repairs by scanning and saving the image as a TIFF file at 400dpi with a gray scale of 256. He then started Digital Darkroom, opened the scanned image of the photograph, and saved it into Digital Darkroom.

Since the image was frayed, he cropped it with the SELECTION RECTANGLE tool from the Tools menu, and saved the selection as a new document. Reid retouched the cracks and scratches with the BRUSHES from the Tools menu. He picked up the correct shade needed to paint over the cracks by clicking the brush on an area that had the right touch-up color while holding down the OPTION key.

Once the cracks were taken care of, Reid filled in the missing corners. For the top corners, he selected the surrounding area with the Selection Rectangle tool, and duplicated the selected area. After positioning these areas he chose **Smudge** from the tools menu, and used the brush to blend the edges between the pieces.

The bottom corner wasn't as easy since a piece of the bench was missing. Again, Reid used the SELECTION RECTANGLE and DUPLICATEd the left side of the bench. Next, he chose FLIP HORIZONTAL from the Transform menu to flip the copy of the bench leg and make it look like the missing leg. After positioning the new leg it looked too dark, since the right half of the bench was facing the light source. Reid simply used the Lighten command from the Tools menu, and lightened this new right leg.

Reid selected the face and the textured area on the left, and sharpened them by choosing Sharpen from the Image menu.

Finally, he sent the image to a film recorder which output these computer images onto film. The film was developed and printed as an ordinary roll.