

From the Brink: Restoring a Photo Collection

Roger D. Thorne

For nine years I served as president of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society. Founded in 1936, the Society is the oldest such organization on the Upper Main Line. I am not a professional historian, and am not even a “local,” having relocated to the Upper Main Line in the 1980s. But I became fascinated with our local history, and was always eager to ask questions, seek answers, and help to open up our rich past for all to see and appreciate.

One of my passions is photography. Early in my service to the Society, I often found myself speaking to local residents who would often politely express their boredom with, or even dislike of, all things historical. Rather than challenge their reaction, I might instead try to find and show them an old photograph of a subject that I thought might interest them ... and in that way alter their dogmatic position. It often worked, transforming disinterest into animated curiosity. On this basis, to increase interest and membership in our Society, several of us began to actively seek images that would bring our local history to life for the community.

Early in 2008, a colleague and I began an exhaustive search of local aerial photographs at the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, including poring through the 14,000+ image collection of the Dallin Aerial Survey Co. Victor Dallin ran his business from the early 1920s through 1941, shooting thousands of aerial photographs of the mid-Atlantic region, the Delaware Valley, and the Philadelphia Main Line. In our search we found that one of the locations well represented by Dallin during the 1920s and ‘30s was the Devon Horse Show and Country Fair.

It was the following year, in July 2009, that my friend Dick Kurtz, a Philadelphia attorney, Society member, and long-time supporter of the Devon Horse Show and Country Fair, invited me to accompany him to the Show office to examine several historical photographs on display. He was concerned that many of these were original images, dating back a century or more, and were now hanging unsecured in the office in non-archival presentations. He and I offered to briefly borrow about a dozen of the most valuable images, do high-resolution scans of their content, create enhanced prints which would be framed for public display, and return the priceless originals to Devon for archival storage. Our offer was gratefully accepted.

Detail from 1898 photograph of an early Show on the grounds of the former Devon Inn.
Courtesy of Devon Horse Show and Country Fair



1931 Dallin Aerial Survey photograph from the Dallin Collection
Courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library



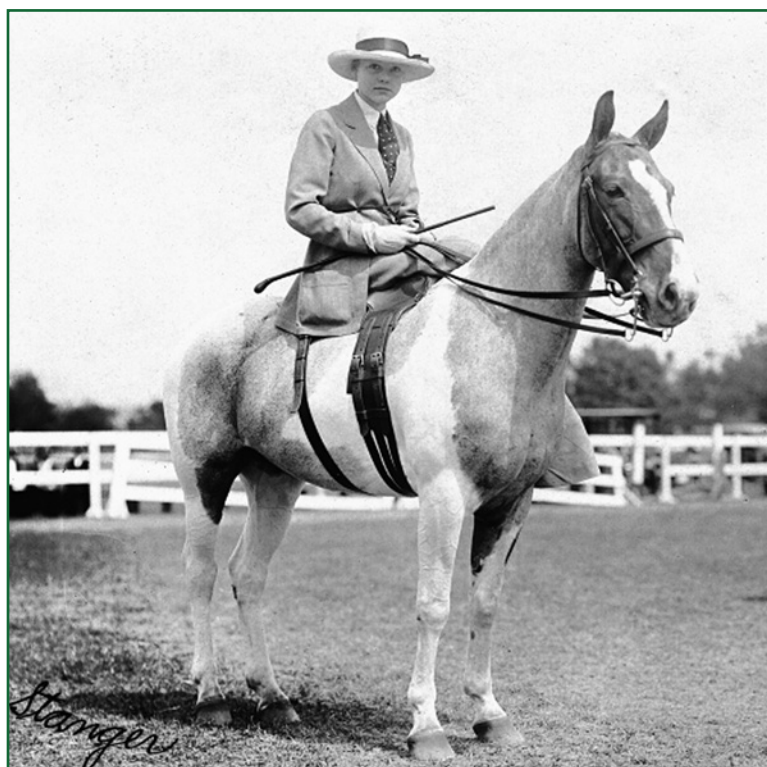
Several days later, upon returning the originals and hanging the reprints, office manager Amy Davis asked, somewhat hesitantly, if we would like to see more of Devon's collection of old memorabilia. Naturally, our response was an excited yes. But nothing in my experience had prepared me for what we would be shown.

Amy escorted Dick and me to Barn #1, and I entered through an unlocked door. An archival nightmare spread before me. Box upon box of photographs, thousands of Devon images, lay in the most appalling conditions. Many of these photographs had compressed one upon the other as humidity and the weight of the box above turned the emulsion of one picture into a glue binding it to the image of the next. Cartons of vintage newspaper articles about Shows past, correspondence and awards ... all scattered amid small mountains of mouse droppings, scurrying silverfish, and clouds of dust that arose when anything was disturbed. Country Fair volunteer Bobbi Cowley subsequently coined the nickname: "The Mouse House."

But beneath the mess, the hidden treasures were unbelievable! Throughout that summer and fall, I did triage one box at a time, sorting the contents of each using the maxim "First, do no harm." Little by little, the contents of the Mouse House were transferred to new archival containers, and safely stored in the Society's temperature-controlled archive for temporary safekeeping. High-resolution scans were made on hundreds of the undamaged images, as well as optical character recognition (OCR) scans on some of the century-old newspaper articles. Stacks of old photographs that had fused together were set aside for expensive professional processing as funds become available. Much work remains to be done ... but what an extraordinary summer.

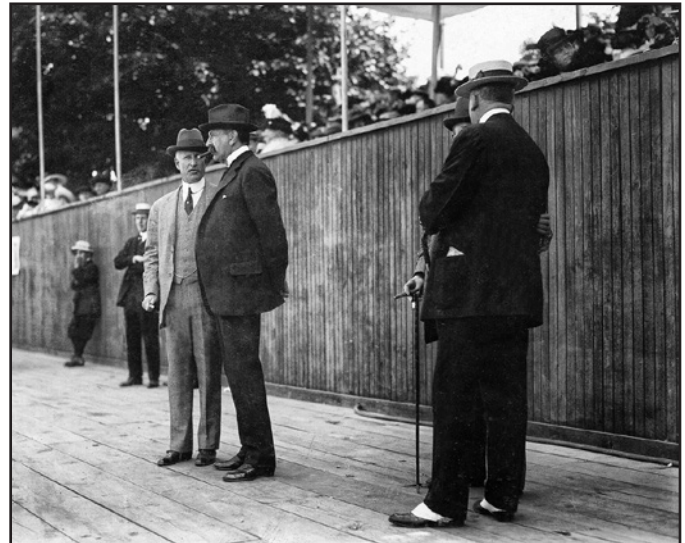
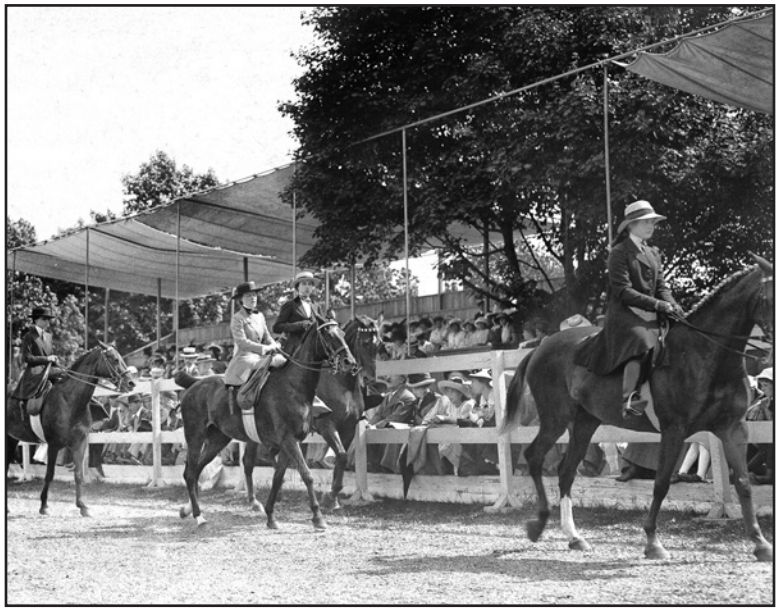


"Mouse House" photos *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne*



This brief article contains a selected few of the images found in 2009 in Devon's woe-begotten archive that could have been lost forever.

The Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society has subsequently found several other collections of Devon images, the largest from Temple University's Urban Archive. Yet I have always believed that an even greater trove of images and memorabilia lie in the attics and scrapbooks of the many longtime Devon loyalists. I believe these hidden treasures represent many small puzzle pieces the sum of which will allow us to even more correctly tell the rich history of Devon. I hope that if you have interest in this fascinating subject, or have treasures to share, you will work with us to support this important endeavor.



Images Courtesy of Devon Horse Show and Country Fair