

Advertisement

Get Vonage broadband phone service by 1/31/05 and get:

- FREE First month
- Waived activation fee
- Then just \$24.99/mo for UNLIMITED calls to US and Canada



USA TODAY

Classifieds: [Cars](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Personals](#) | [USA TODAY Marketplace](#)

- Home
- News
- Travel
- Money
- Sports
- Life
- Tech
- Weather

# Lifestyle

▪ [E-MAIL THIS](#) ▪ [PRINT THIS](#) ▪ [SAVE THIS](#) ▪ [MOST POPULAR](#) ▪ [SUBSCRIBE](#)

Posted 1/20/2005 9:20 PM Updated 1/21/2005 2:16 PM

## Memories gone in a snap

By Maria Puente, USA TODAY

There's one in almost every American household: a shoebox stuffed with faded snapshots of days gone by, the kids' baby pictures, the ugly dress you wore to the prom, innumerable views of the Grand Canyon, the college roommate passed out drunk. Americans have been filling such shoeboxes for generations, and now, thanks to the delete button on digital cameras, this widespread custom is coming to an end.



As digital cameras take hold, will our boxes of baby, vacation and prom pics disappear?

By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

For more than 100 years, ever since the introduction of the Kodak handheld film camera, ordinary Americans have taken pictures of themselves, forming a massive archive of the individual and collective histories of a nation. Everything — the perfect pictures and the imperfect pictures, the ones in which eyes are closed, the frame askew, the pose unflattering, the image blurred — all of them went into photo albums and shoeboxes, to be laughed at or puzzled over later by families seeking memories or anthropologists seeking insight about a culture.

So what will future anthropologists think when they look back on our pictures (assuming there are any) from the dawn of the digital era? Will they wonder, "Why do all these people look so good?" (**Related story:** [Get the most out of digital](#))

By now there are an estimated 54 million digital cameras in American hands, and digital sales have outstripped sales of film cameras for the past two years. An estimated 10 million digital cameras were shipped in the USA just for the holidays,

Advertisement

Get Vonage broadband phone service by 1/31/05 and get:

- FREE First month
- Waived activation fee
- Then just \$24.99/mo for UNLIMITED calls to US and Canada

VONAGE  
THE BROADBAND PHONE COMPANY

SIGN UP NOW >>

Marketplace

[What's this?](#)

### Tickets

Buy and sell tickets to premium and sold out events

Search by events or regions:

Location

Genre



powered by



**Ticket holders:**

Looking to sell tickets quick? [Register now.](#)

with millions upon millions of pictures snapped at parties and family gatherings in the past month alone. As growing numbers of amateur photographers are discovering, digital technology allows you to delete an unwanted image while it's still in the camera. Did Junior cross his eyes for the Christmas photo? No matter — just press a button and it's gone, ready for a retake.

Related advertising links [What's this?](#)



[Get Flash](#)

**American Medical Alarms, Inc.**

If you or someone you love is concerned that a health or medical emergency may occur without the ability to get help, rest assured with a medical alarm from American Medical Alarms, Inc.

[www.americanmedica...](http://www.americanmedicalalarms.com)

**Lose Up to 30lbs. - Guaranteed!**

Free diet profile. For men and women who want to lead a healthy lifestyle. The Amazing Diet Patch System is one of the easiest and most convenient ways to lose weight.

[www.amazingdietpat...](http://www.amazingdietpatches.com)

**Free Health Insurance Quotes and Help**

Get a free health insurance quote at no cost or obligation. Individuals, families, businesses, self-employed - we have you covered! Let a local MostChoice expert save you time and money.

[www.mostchoice.com](http://www.mostchoice.com)

Does everybody do this? The International Data Corporation, which conducts industry surveys, estimates that about 23% of all digital images captured by cameras are deleted. That still leaves a lot of images captured — a projected 28 billion in 2004, up from 12.7 billion in 2003.

But even if people preserve all those images, survey data show that they don't print as many of the images they capture — good or bad. According to Certified Digital Photo Processors, a group of independent photo labs and camera stores, only 13% of digital images captured ever end up on paper. By contrast, an estimated 98% of film images captured eventually were printed.

Instead, most digital photos are stored on computer hard drives or the increasingly popular online photo-sharing archives, making shoeboxes unnecessary.

"People are editing their family histories, deleting precious moments they will treasure years from now," laments Jim Leibrock of PicturesMatter.com, a Web site set up by the digital processing industry to promote picture printing. "And they're ill-educated about how fragile these digital images are. Sooner or later computers are going to crash, and these images have a chance of being lost."

So these trends suggest intriguing questions: Will *any* imperfect pictures be preserved and printed in the future? Will their absence present an edited, even misleading, picture of our collective memories? What will happen to the billion-dollar picture printing industry? And *what about the children?*

Children, says child psychologist Kenneth Condrell of Buffalo, actually need photographs they can hold to foster a sense of emotional well-being. In other words, all those family slide shows your parents made you sit through were actually *good* for you. Condrell is so convinced of this that he has been hired by the digital processors for a media tour of the country to promote the printing of family photos.

"Pictures that show kids with loved ones add to their sense of feeling secure and loved," Condrell says. "Children love to go back and see themselves as babies and toddlers and how important they were to everybody. It helps develop a memory bank and an identity as a family member."

### **'The human element'**

Historians and artists are beginning to wonder about the future of candid photography, too. "Mistakes" are often the most revealing kind of photographs, says Weston Naef, curator of photographs at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, which just concluded an unusual exhibit, *Close to Home: An American Album*, that took a serious look at amateur snapshot photography as "the chief visual instrument of social memory." Nearly 200 photos were in the exhibit, most of them taken in America from 1930 to the mid-1960s, most of them black-and-white, abandoned by their owners and rediscovered in flea markets and secondhand shops.

"It turns out that 'mistakes' are what make many photographs, especially snapshot photographs, because they represent the human element," Naef says. "Some of the most interesting pictures are being deleted because they seem 'imperfect,' so the concern is that future snapshots are going to become more conventional, more perfect — and less interesting."

Non-historians have thought about this, too, even as they jab the delete button on their cameras.

"I always delete pictures that aren't up to snuff, but not *every* icky picture," says Dana Marsh, a software company worker in Washington, D.C. "There are always those goofy pictures that you have to keep — if only to embarrass someone later on. It's that type of goofy picture that will hold the truth of our society generations from now."

Says Sara Brown, a waitress in Kearney, Neb.: "Pictures — even bad ones — are precious moments in time. I always shriek when my parents pull out old pictures or home videos of me to my boyfriend, but I let him see them anyway, because the person in those pictures made me who I am today."

For some people, the question of whether and when to delete is just silly. You *have* to delete.

"When you spend \$5,000 on a trip, you want to make sure the mementos of the trip are as good as can be," says Derek Osolind, who works in advertising in Ann Arbor, Mich. "I never have to wonder if the rainbow near the lake will show up in the shot or if my eyes were open. I know within seconds."

Professional photographers may use the delete button even more often than amateurs. "A professional will be more inclined to delete images for technical reasons or because they have better images," says Mike Sargent, a photographer and vice president of editorial operations for Getty Images, a photo archive and wire service.

Still, he says, failure to delete can have positive and negative consequences: What if the soldiers who snapped pictures of Iraqi prisoners being abused in Abu Ghraib prison had deleted those images? Would the abuse have come to light? Would the abuse have continued if the pictures had *not* come to light?

Indeed, the end-of-an-era hand-wringing may be overstated. Maybe people are deleting memories, but "they're bad memories," jokes Gary Pageau, a spokesman for the Photo Marketing Association, who wonders wryly whether people suffer from occasional "deleter's remorse." In any case, he says, there's no reason to panic.

"As the industry evolves and people become more digitally literate, you're going to see more solutions, such as online storage for pictures and lots of photo albuming," he says. "Accidental, loose pictures are not going to be saved, but people are going to have a lot more access to whatever *is* saved."

Already, online photo archiving and sharing has exploded. One of the largest sites, Webshots.com, has nearly 120 million archived photos available for view and gets about 15 million visitors a month. Every day, people upload more than 500,000 photos to the site; to date, more than 5 *billion* photos have been downloaded.

Narendra Rocherolle, vice president of the San Francisco-based archiving company, says there has been an explosion in photography in the digital era because people perceive digital photos as "free," compared with buying film and paying to process it. So deletions are more than made up for by the soaring number of images being captured.

Moreover, people are not really editing the streams of images they post online for all to see. "If you go to the shots being posted, they're reality-based and authentic," he says. "People find comfort and connectedness in that we all share the embarrassing moments."

At Shutterfly.com, which helps people make prints of their digital images, most customers are mothers who take the kind of pictures that mothers have always taken. "We are still seeing the majority of pictures are of young children," says Bridgette Thomas, communications director. "Next are weddings, travel pictures and pets. And people are taking even sillier pictures now. People think, 'If it's free, why not load them all?' "

### **Dusty, faded treasures**

But are they *really* pictures if they exist only in the online ether? John Wells, a San Francisco lawyer, thinks not. Ten years ago, after Wells' father died, he was going through his things, including a pile of floppy disks that no longer fit into any functioning computer. So into the trash they went. Then he found a real treasure: a dusty box in the garage rafters filled with thousands of slides that chronicled nearly 40 years of his family's history. He could hold them up to the light and see his half-remembered past — kids' birthday parties, Christmas mornings and long-dead loved ones full of life again.

"Looking at them now, all of them were fascinating, even the goofs," Wells says. "Once a picture is in digital format, you need to go through an unnatural act to see what it is, and there's a real danger it'll never be seen again."

So, as he prepares for the birth of his first child, he's made a decision: "I'm not getting a digital camera. I'm sticking with Kodachrome."

Related advertising links [What's this?](#)

**American Medical Alarms, Inc.**

If you or someone you love is concerned that a health or medical emergency may occur without the ability to get help, rest assured with a medical alarm from American Medical Alarms, Inc.

[www.americanmedica...](http://www.americanmedica...)

**Lose Up to 30lbs. - Guaranteed!**

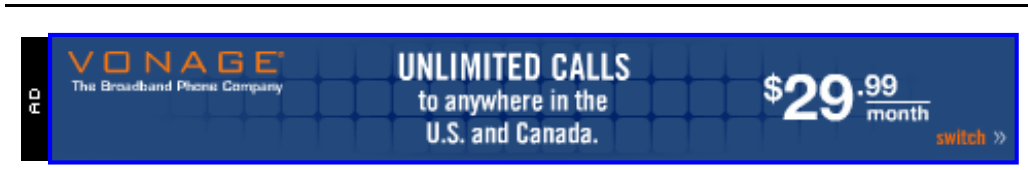
Free diet profile. For men and women who want to lead a healthy lifestyle. The Amazing Diet Patch System is one of the easiest and most convenient ways to lose weight.

[www.amazingdietpat...](http://www.amazingdietpat...)

**Free Health Insurance Quotes and Help**

Get a free health insurance quote at no cost or obligation. Individuals, families, businesses, self-employed - we have you covered! Let a local MostChoice expert save you time and money.

[www.mostchoice.com](http://www.mostchoice.com)



AD **VONAGE**  
The Broadband Phone Company

**UNLIMITED CALLS**  
to anywhere in the  
U.S. and Canada.

**\$29<sup>99</sup>**  
month

[switch >>](#)

USATODAY.com partners: [USA Weekend](#) • [Sports Weekly](#) • [Education](#) • [Space.com](#)

[Home](#) • [Travel](#) • [News](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

Resources: [Mobile News](#) • [Site Map](#) • [FAQ](#) • [Contact Us](#)

[Email News](#) • [Jobs with Us](#) • [Terms of service](#) • [Privacy Policy](#) • [Media Kit](#) • [Press Room](#)

Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds [XML](#)

[Add USATODAY.com headlines to your Web site](#)

© Copyright 2005 USA TODAY, a division of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#)