Photographs are among the many tools the Chippewa Valley Museum uses to discover and interpret history. (We also use oral histories, artifacts, and many different kinds of documents.)

We have 14,000 photographs in our collection, and many of those photos have detailed information associated with them: where and when they were taken, who the people are, what was going on (one photo might be of a street fair, another might be of a board meeting).

But, a photo without any accompanying information: Is it history? What can we learn from such a photograph? How do we start to learn its own story, much less a story it might tell about something else?

On the next page, we show a photo from the Chippewa Valley Museum archival collection in the Glenn Curtis Smoot Library and Archive. In our vault, it exists as a 10x13 print. Unlike many of our prints, when you turn this one over, there’s no writing on the back of any kind, not a single thing that would give it a context if you saw it all by itself.
So, we don’t know anything “about” the photo. Let’s not give up. This is not the end of the adventure – really only the beginning. Let’s start with the idea that all photos tell a story. Then let’s ask ourselves some questions and see if the answers lead us to the very story this photo tells. Journalists sometimes talk about “the five W’s” – who, when, what, where, and why. Seems like a good place to start.

Who: There’s a group of people in the photo. Are they children or adults? [children] Are there any adults associated with the scene at all? [No – but yes, there are adults associated: the photographer might be an adult, as might be the owner(s) of the drum, and the owner(s) of the chairs]

So, they are kids. Boys or girls? [both] Older or younger? [both, although none appears to be an older teen]

Do they appear to be working or playing? [open ended] Why do you say that? [open ended]

[If most people in your group agree that they are “playing,” you might introduce the following concept. The quotation “Play is the work of children” is attributed to Friedrich Froebel, a German educator (1782-1852) who laid the foundation for modern education based on the recognition that children have unique needs and capabilities. Froebel created the concept of the “kindergarten” and also coined the term. If the children in this photo are “playing,” perhaps they are also practicing skills they have seen adults use, and that they might themselves use more seriously someday.]

Do you think any of these kids are related, like brothers and sisters, or cousins? [open ended] Why? [open ended]

(At this point, you might point out the girl near the center of the photo.) What is she doing? [some will probably say she is handing the “drum beater” or “drum stick” to the toddler; others might say she is taking it away. This can lead to a short discussion about how kids – perhaps especially siblings – treat each other, either cooperatively or competitively, depending on your interpretation of the action in the photo. Of course, siblings treat each other both cooperatively and competitively, so either works...]
OK, so those are a few observations and guesses about “who” is in the photo. Let’s investigate “when” the photo might have been taken. Do you see anything in the photo that might help “date” it?

[Some students may point out the aluminum-frame webbed lawn chairs. These have been commonly available since the 1950s and are still being sold new today. So that dates the photo as 1950s or later.]

[Many adults will immediately pick out the plaid pants the child at lower left is wearing, which apparently have bell-bottoms; both the pattern and the style date those from the 1970s. Children may need to be guided to this.] Great observation! I think that might be true. But, can you think of any reasons they might not be from the 1970s? [they might be retro, they might be hand-me-downs, they might be from a thrift store. If so, the photograph could be more recent than the 1970s.]

[Very observant people will point out that both the shirt on the toddler near the middle of the frame, and the shoes of the child wearing the plaid pants, have something like cartoons printed on them. Then the observers might add that a closer look at those details might give a date, if, say, the the cartoons represented were Strawberry Shortcake or something else from a particular era. That’s excellent observation, and should be congratulated. At any rate, that is a very generalizable lesson – and similar details (logos or whatever) can help date many recent photos. For example, the very-recognizable Apple logo had a spectrum motif back in the 1980s but had changed to look like chrome in the 2000s. In this case, I think the shoes just-mentioned have Linus from the Peanuts comic strip on them, so that doesn’t really narrow it down from what other people have already said. But still, it’s great to talk about for a minute.]
All right, so we’ve got some idea that the photo might be from the 1970s, although it’s been pointed out that it could be later. Now let’s talk about “where.”


Now, let’s get into the “what” of the photo. In this case, what is going on, and what just happened or might be about to happen. Let’s look for clues.

How are the kids dressed? [pretty casually, which might be an argument against a funeral or a wedding] What are they sitting around? [a drum] What does that suggest? [Native Americans, a pow wow] What’s on the ground behind them? [Someone in the group will probably guess a tarp or a tent, which is my guess, too. If no one suggests it, you might.] What does a tarp or tent suggest? [a gathering, a party, an outdoor reception, a pow wow] The tarp or tent is down on the ground. Why would that be? [Some will probably suggest that, if it was a party, the party’s over; others will suggest that it’s laid out for something taking place in the future, say, the next day. Both very good guesses.] What about the grass? [It’s been mowed] [It might be someone’s yard, or a playground, or it might have been mowed for an event] [some people have guessed that it looks like the grass has been walked on a lot; I don’t quite see it myself, but it’s not a bad observation.]

What about the structure in the background? What does it look like? [Some might guess a garage or a shed; some might even guess a log cabin] Does it look fancy or plain? [very plain] Would you see a structure like that in a rich area or a rich neighborhood? [probably not]

We’ve already done some thinking about “why,” although we haven’t even asked the question yet! For example, we thought about why there might be a tarp laid out, or why the grass might have been mowed, or why a drum is set up. But here’s another “why” question to think about as we go forward. We don’t need to answer it right now, but it might be good to keep in mind. Why did someone take the photograph?

All right. Sometimes looking at another photograph, if you have one, can help you discover more about the first photograph. So let’s look at another photo, and see what we can learn.
What do you see in both photos? [Immediately someone will mention the drum]
[Probably, someone will mention the arm of the chair at lower-right — in the second photo — looks like it might be the arm of one of the aluminum folding chairs. And that’s a good guess.]

[The drum beater toward the right of the frame looks very similar to the one the girl and the toddler are exchanging: both are multi-hued and have six segments, but no one may point that out. Someone may, however, point out that both photos show “drum sticks.”]

Great! So, given the things in common, we can guess that these photos may be related, which means that one might help us learn about the other. Let’s go through some of the same questions we asked about the first photo.

Children or adults? [adults] Men or women? [men, although you may get a little disagreement, and that’s all right.] Older or younger? [the fellow in the black hat looks older than the rest. Of course, all adults look old when you’re a kid.] Do they look like they’re playing or working? [open ended] Let’s ask it another way: do they look “serious”? [Yes, they look serious.]
Our next question is “when.” Again, are there some things that help us date the era? [As with the first photo, adults are very good at this, but kids may need help.] [Shirt pattern on the guy to the far left; design of the lamp; macrame plant hanger (a very definitive clue); the television set; the curtains. All point, more or less, to the 1970s.]

Great! That's a lot of clues. Now, as with the other photo, it could be later, but probably not earlier than the 1970s. So we've got even more evidence as to “when” — enough to say, “I bet these two photos are from the Seventies.”

Let’s think about “where.” Inside or outside? [inside] Home or apartment? [It’s very hard to say.] Well, if we can’t determine that, can we say if it’s more likely someone’s residence or, say, a business? [Definitely looks like someone’s living space.]

What are they doing? [playing a drum; they are in a drum circle.] Are they playing “for real” at an event, or are they practicing? [Practicing, almost certainly, since you’d most often drum “for real” at a pow wow, and a pow wow would be in a public space]

For just a second, let’s talk about the photographs themselves. Color or black-and-white? [black-and-white] Snapshot or professional photo? [open ended, although, in this era, the fact that they’re black-and-white is a clue that they’re professional.] Now, you can’t tell here, but the prints that the museum has are 10x13 prints mounted on high-quality matte board. Does that change your opinion about whether they’re snapshots or professional photos? [open ended, but many should now guess professional.]
As it exists in the museum’s collection, this photograph DOES have something written on the back, which is a stroke of luck for the museum. Someone has written six words: “Joe Rose (black hat) Bad River.” So, it’s a fairly safe assumption that whoever wrote that thought the guy in the black hat was Joe Rose.

You can do what any 21st-century researcher might, and Google “Joe Rose” + “Bad River” – a technique probably unavailable when that text was written on the photo.

Here’s text from the very first link (as accessed on 9/1/2009), from http://www.mickeyhart.net/Pages/Artists/ARTISTS2.HTML (By the way ... Mickey Hart: drummer for the Grateful Dead):

Bad River Singers (Bad River Reservation, Wisconsin)

Joe Dan Rose (lead), Dan Powless, Ed Mayotte, Matt O’Claire, Francis Stone, Robert Leoso The Bad River drum was organized in 1978, when Joe and some friends were helped by his father, Joe Rose. The formation of this young group came at a time when the community was facing a number of problems, not the least of which had been the loss through sale or theft of all its traditional drums. The emergence of the Bad River Singers had a healing effect on community disintegration; many elders, silent until then, came forth to share their knowledge of the Bad River traditions. The young singers became active in other matters, directing their energies in building a new drum, helping the local powwow committee prepare the dance grounds for their annual “Manoomin [wild rice] Celebration.” As Joe Dan puts it, “As we learned to sing, we began to understand the symbolic meaning of ‘the Heart of the Drum’ and the importance of facing each other in a circle. It was a vital part of growing up.”

Now, what follows is a guess, but there are some clues to back it up: Joe Rose (in the black hat) is practicing with the newly formed Bad River Singers in 1978. They may even be getting ready for the annual Manoomin Celebration on the Bad River Reservation at the pow wow grounds. It may or may not be a coincidence, but this would be an excellent reason to have a professional photographer on the reservation.
So many of the clues are starting to fit: the clothes and objects (such as the macrame plant hanger) appear to be from the Seventies; written information on one of the photos identifies one of the subjects; an outside source (the web) gives an account consistent with the evidence of the photos themselves ... which then might answer some “why” questions, including Why are they drumming, and Why was the photo taken?

Let’s go back to the first photo then, and make some more conjectures. It might have been taken on the Bad River Reservation - perhaps around an event at Bad River, even the Manoomin Celebration. Like the other photo, it might have been taken in 1978, perhaps even on the same day (seems very likely, in fact). Say the event is over but the drum hasn’t been put away yet, and the kids have taken the opportunity to practice what they’ve been seeing all day: men drumming. Or, perhaps more likely, the photographer arranged to have them assemble around the drum for this shot. (Children would not generally be allowed to around a sacred drum; this might be what they call a “fun drum.”) It’s even possible that these are some of the children of the men in the second photograph!

Supposing the photos were taken in 1978, then they weren’t taken very long ago, as photographs go. Most of the men are young in the second photo, and might-well still be around. Most of the children in the first photo wouldn’t even be 40 years old yet. A web search discovers that Joe Rose was, as of September 2009, an associate professor of Native American Studies at Northland College in Ashland, Wis., just a few miles from the border of the Bad River Indian Reservation. His email and phone number are listed on his faculty web page. He could probably identify all the men in the drum circle, and maybe all the kids in the first photo, too, or at least a lot of them. You could interview Joe Rose. With a phone book (or anywho.com) and a few hours, you could find some of those “kids,” now adults, and see if they remembered that day. You could find out more about the Bad River Reservation or the Manoomin Celebration. You could write a whole research paper, or maybe even a book, starting with these first steps.
In the end, with some good careful observation, and looking closely at another photograph for clues, and then combining that observation with some outside research, we’ve found that this “unidentified” photo, one, has a story to tell, and two, opens up whole new avenues for research.

Many, many photographs are like this ~ especially relatively recent photos, and especially detailed or candid photos. (This is less true of studio portraits.) If you look at them closely, and you have just a little bit of luck, you can get volumes of information out of them.

Here’s another “why” question we can investigate with an outside source. Why is “NO DIN” written on the drum? I don’t know, but I have some leads.

In Ojibwe, “no din” means “wind” or “the wind.” So it might have a spiritual meaning that comes from that phrase.

A web search of “No Din” + “Ojibwe” discovers that one of the “second chiefs” of the Mille Lacs band of the Ojibwe was Noodin ~ or “No Din” (translating as “Wind”). He was a signatory to the 1842 treaty at La Point, Madeline Island, Wis., and a witness to the 1947 treaty at “Fond du Lac” of Lake Superior (not the same as the present-day city of Fond du Lac, Wis.). Yet another avenue to investigate: find out more about this important leader.

And I bet Joe Rose would know right off-hand why that phrase is on the drum.

By the way, the photographer was Alfred Charles Bonanno ~ Al Bonanno ~ a former *Time* magazine photographer who lives in Ladysmith, Wis. So these are professional photographs.