Photographic albums were not new to the 20th century, the 1860s saw the introduction of book-like albums with windowed pages to hold carte de visites. Larger versions held cabinet cards two decades later.

These albums were usually very elegant and somewhat expensive for most people. It took the flood of snapshots from amateurs with their Brownie and folding cameras to make inexpensive photograph albums a part of nearly every household.

An advertisement (Figure B-1) in a 1921 Saturday Evening Post magazine tugs at the reader’s heart strings in the first paragraph:

“To-morrow, when the children have outgrown childhood, it holds you fast—brings back again and again, as you pore over the pages of your snap-shot album, the vivid story of the children as they were.

Eastman Kodak planted the seed for cameras and albums in consumers' minds as well as any media executive today.

Figure B-1. Kodak Brownie ad in a 1921 Saturday Evening Post.

Figure B-2. The 1920 Sears catalog carried a full page (partial shown here) of photograph albums. They were available in loose-leaf and bound versions, ranging in price from less than a dollar for small cloth bound albums to over six dollars for English leather bound large versions. Each came with 50 leaves of black pages. The 1923 catalog listed 300 gummed corners for 24 cents, a jar of paste for 15 cents, ‘Snow White’ white ink for 23 cents, and white pencils were 8 cents to write a name or note on the black pages.
Albums came in many sizes to fit the buyers needs or budget. The top album in Figure B-3 is 11” x 7”, the one on the left is 10” by 6.5”, and the small one on the right is 8” x 5.5”. The smaller one was given to the owner (author’s father) for Christmas in 1927.

The 1925 Sears catalog describes the more expensive albums as having four white pages in the front for writing information about the photographs.

The page labeled PHOTOGRAPH RECORD in Figure B-4 is from the left-most album in B-3.

Figure B-3. Three different size albums from the 1920s and 30s. Each with black pages, bound in leatherette.

Figure B-4. A complete and diligent log of photographs taken in the late 1930s by a high school senior.
If you are lucky, the owner of the album identified the pictures in the log and with white ink on the pages. If you never remove photographs from the album, this will help you maintain the history. However, some of the pictures may become loose and fall out, or purposefully be taken out of the album, losing the association of information with the photograph.

It is wise to record the information on the back of the photograph if it can be easily removed. Unfortunately some photos were glued to their pages. This solves the problem of missing photographs from the page. However, if the photo was mounted using corner tabs, gently remove the photograph and write the information in No. 2 pencil on the back. Then return the photo to its original place.

For even better archiving, scan the photograph and record the information in the properties or file info area of the digital file. An additional suggestion is to name the digital file with the person’s name and year the picture was taken, if known.

A variety of blank scrap books appeared in the 1917 Sears catalog, these were essentially interchangeable as photo albums. Both contained 40 to 50 pages of loose-leaf black pages.
The War Years

Albums were still highly popular into the 1940s, and they become more attractive than early dark versions. The large album in Figure B-7 is bound with a cream colored, highly embossed cover. It holds 15 inch x 11 inch black pages. It was new in 1941, the first pictures were wedding pictures of the owners, but it was continually added to throughout the 40s.

The album with a patriotic motif in Figure B-8 was purchased in Honolulu in 1945 by a soldier stationed nearby. It contains light colored pages, yellowing with age. The lighter pages allowed easier notation of the pictures with any pen or pencil. Still, most albums of the time still contained black pages.

Another military themed album, shown in Figure B-9, was bought by the same soldier before shipping overseas. Outside any military post are numerous shops that cater to the soldiers and sailors - enticing them with must-have items, especially on pay day.

End of Paper-Page Albums

These type of photo albums were widely used until the 1950s. By 1956, the Sears catalog was selling albums full of clear pages with pockets for photographs. Bound or loose-leaf albums with blank paper pages were still available, but were listed under the heading “Photo Albums and Scrapbooks”, with no designation of how it was to be used on the covers.