I know when that film was taken, but if I didn’t, our clothes and the kitchen furniture would point to a time frame. Just as with print photo detecting, deciphering clues in home movies involves studying details. The technology used, attire worn, and accessories shown, along with your family history research, provide the storyline to the image. Follow these steps to decipher the clues in your old home movies and use them to bring your family’s story to life.

1. **Take stock.**
   First, survey what’s in your film archive. Mixed in with family films may be commercial productions intended for family movie nights. (If you own any old professional movies, watch for nitrate film, a chemically unstable, flammable film used from 1898 until about 1950. It should be copied if desired and disposed of following local fire regulations. Fortunately, virtually no films manufactured for the home market are nitrate.) Don’t stop with your own collection; seek out home movies in your relatives’ holdings as well. Ask about them when you inquire about still pictures. You might be surprised by what you find.

Not all the movies of your relatives will be in family homes. Great Aunt May and Uncle Jerry could appear in films of their community events. If you’re lucky, a local archive or history buff has posted historical clips online on a site such as YouTube. Try searching for the names of your ancestors’ community, local events, schools, workplaces, social clubs and more. Add the word history to narrow in on old movies. Google has a video search feature, too, at <google.com/videohp>. My dad lived near Saylesville, RI, when a textile labor strike took place in 1934. Using Saylesville strike as a search term, I found several news clips of the strike. Dad’s not in any, but it’s fascinating to watch a historical event that affected him. Also try searching with a family member’s name and a place as a qualifier, such as Joe Brown Providence 1954. See how Family Tree Magazine contributing editor Sunny Jane Morton found footage of her husband’s great-grandfather and his dog at <silsalouisecooke.com/2015/02/amazing-find-ever-family-history-youtube-no-kidding>.

2. **Look for a label.**
   Examine the boxes and film cans in your collection for labels with subjects, dates, names or places. If you’re lucky, your relatives had title frames with a title and date inserted into the film when it was developed. My mom never labeled her prints, but she did make sure that almost every box of film had at least a date on the outside. If your film boxes lack description, don’t despair. Try to identify a time frame for the film based on any information written on the outside of the box. I recognize my mother’s handwriting on my family film boxes noting who’s in the film (albeit first names only) and sometimes when it was taken. If there aren’t any clues on your containers, search online for the product and format. Most original film boxes contain the name of the film used, and the film’s size and sprockets can tell you what kind was used (see the next step for more details).

Label any unlabeled boxes with easy-to-spot dates using a soft lead pencil, and sort them in chronological order. If you can’t write on the can with pencil, you can use archival-quality adhesive labels. Store the films in acid- and lignin-free boxes or in their original cans.

3. **Check the format.**
   Although motion picture cameras and projectors were available as early as the 1890s, initially cameras were expensive and affordable only to the well-to-do. During the Great Depression, a single roll of film cost $6 and the camera cost $100—well beyond the pocketbooks of an average American. Your family movie archive likely begins in the mid-20th century, when equipment costs dropped. Advertisements in newspapers and magazines promoted the message that you could produce your own screen worthy film. As with a still camera, once the movie was shot, the film had to be sent for developing.

A variety of film formats and cameras characterize the history of home movies. From 35mm footage used in the turn-of-the-century studios to Super 8 mm from the 1960s, the type and size of the film can help you date your footage. Keep in mind, though, that a family might use a camera as long as film for it was available, even if that model was no longer in production. Color is a relative newcomer, with Eastman making its color motion picture film available in 1950.

- **16mm:** In 1923, Eastman Kodak introduced the 16mm direct reversal film system and projectors, so-called because the film measured 16mm across. Though initially marketed for home use, professionals quickly took to it, especially when sound became possible. Silent 16mm has sprockets along both edges; sound 16mm has sprockets on one edge.

- **8mm:** Standard 8 film (also called Regular 8) became available in 1932. It has a frame down the center and a single border with large sprockets. With cameras costing approximately $30 and advertisers selling the idea of documenting milestones, lots of amateur moviemakers started filming life’s moments. A December 1937 advertisement in the Dallas Morning News lists an Eastman movie camera for $34.50, with optional floodlights for night shoots.

- **Super 8:** In 1963, Kodak announced this new 8mm film with cartridge loading, a larger frame size and smaller sprockets along one edge. For approximately $200, consumers bought a system including the camera, projector, movie light, camera case and a screen.

4. **Preserve the footage.**
   The content of the film will really help sell your family story. But don’t watch it just yet. Film conservators advise transferring old movies to new media before viewing them. Watching a fragile film—or even threading it through the projector—could destroy it. Film shrinks and becomes brittle over time, and color film fades. If you must handle the film itself, touch only the edges.