

A Three-Part Series on Slides — Part 1: Glass Slides

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services



Examples of photographic images preserved on glass

Before photo albums... before prints... even before film—images were stored on glass.

When thinking about how family memories are preserved over the years, video, movie film, photographs, and even audio usually come to mind. But the media that came before all of them is sometimes overlooked—slides.

When people of a certain age think of slides today, they might remember watching family slideshows during the 1970s—usually images of a recent vacation or life event. Many people are surprised to learn that slides existed over 100 years before that.

Slides of this earlier era are called **glass slides**, or more commonly, **lantern slides**.

Lantern slides were introduced in the mid-1800s and were widely used into the early 1900s. The first time they were brought into my studio—about 10 years ago—I was surprised by the quality of the

images. These were photographs that were over 100 years old, yet still held remarkable detail.

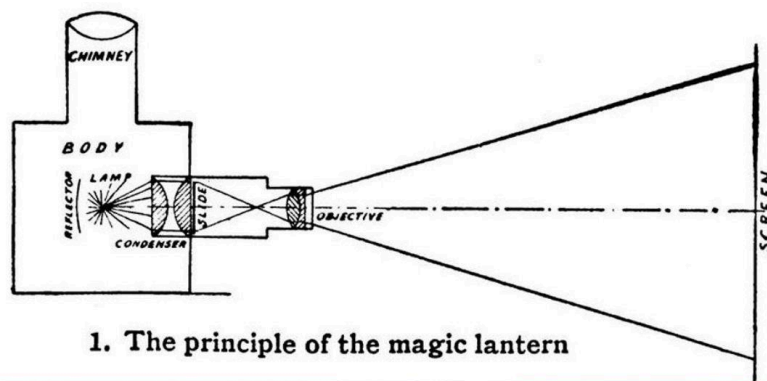
In simple terms, the glass was used much like film. It was coated with light-sensitive chemicals that captured the image when exposed through a camera lens.

Early photographic processes required the image to be developed fairly quickly after exposure. Because of this, photographers often traveled with portable darkroom setups so they could process the image on site.

This format also became one of the earliest ways to share images with a group. Using a device called a **magic lantern**, light would shine through the glass and project the image onto a wall.

Early versions used flame-based light sources, while later models transitioned to electric illumination once that became available. Either way, the goal was the same—bring images to life for others to see.

In many ways, this was the original slideshow—long before 35mm slide carousels became popular in living rooms decades later.



"Magic lantern" projectors—the original way to share images

Most glass slides were made in a standard size of about 3¼ by 4 inches.

Some were true photographic images captured on glass. Others were carefully hand-painted, often in vibrant colors. There were even versions with simple mechanical elements designed to create early animation effects.

What's remarkable is how much detail these slides can hold. Despite their age, many of them still look incredibly sharp when properly digitized. It's a reminder that even in the 1800s, people were already finding ways to preserve and share their stories.

There was also a glass negative format that is often confused with glass slides. These were used to create photographic prints and are a different process altogether. Maybe we'll cover those another time.

If you happen to come across any glass slides, it's important to handle them with care. Over time, the image layer can begin to separate, and the glass itself can crack if not handled properly.

Every now and then, something like this comes through the door—a format most people have never seen, carrying memories from a time most of us can barely imagine.

It's yet another reminder of why we love what we do—and why we strive to do the best we can for every customer.

Next week: the moment glass gave way to film—and why it changed everything.

Lives are important.

Our mission is to connect them to future generations the best way possible.

Finally, if you have a topic you'd like me to write about, let me know at stilson@stilson.com and I'll add it to the list.

— Bill Stilson

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