

# (LIFE)TIME CAPSULES

Aunty Babe's photo albums contain more than just memories



THELMA "BABE" HEGSTROM

words :: Danielle Baker

When I close my eyes, I can see her house. I can trace the swirling patterns of her Battleship linoleum and take in all the turquoise: cupboards, counter, and rotary phone. Her arborite table runs the length of the room and the fridge—an afterthought—sits next to the couch. Looking straight across from the entrance, I can see her photo albums: full of stories, full of life. Pristine in their presentation and complete in their knowledge.

My great Aunty Babe was an avid photographer. In a time before cameras were a common item, she was rarely seen without one dangling around her neck. She only had one focus: to document her life, and in doing so she recorded a whole community and their way of being. For decades, she captured the essence of life in a remote fishing village on the very west coast of Vancouver Island. And her albums—each one carefully curated—were her pride and joy.

They are uniform in style, but with differing patterns adorning the covers and wrapping over the spines—some floral, some plain, some geometric. Each has a carefully handwritten label describing its contents. They are neatly lined up in order along three shelves top to bottom and deliberately placed at the furthest edge of the room—within sight of guests, but out of reach of careless spills.

Opening those albums was entirely magical. The pages and pages of images—all places and people I knew, but in a time before I existed—transported me beyond the fabric of my own memories; it was time travel. When allowed, I would sit with those albums for hours; fishing alongside my uncle, swimming in the ocean with my mom, laughing joyously next to my grandma and the minister from the down the road. ▶



It could be hard to schedule a viewing—and even if you did, you had to be careful to be invited back. If you had the audacity to open an album without washing your hands or—and I can still hear her complaining about this—to consume food while leafing through the pages: “They got crumbs in them!” Aunty Babe would denounce such visitors with a thump on the table for effect.

We lived a short boat ride away on a good day (or a nearly insurmountable journey during a westerly) and we would visit Aunty Babe often. During the few times in my youth that I was deemed clean enough, polite enough, and mature enough to sit and look through them, those albums changed my life. I was growing up in the same isolated community that she had documented, one that was hugged tightly to the edge of the world by miles of forest and hemmed to the shores by the expansive ocean. It was one with little influence from beyond our small harbour.

I've always appreciated a beautiful photograph, but it was the documentary nature of Aunty Babe's images that connected with me. Her ability to freeze a moment, an era, an emotion in time for me to experience all those years later was powerful. Through her photos, I could join the family trips to Helby Island and smell the musty canvas tent walls. I could hear the giggles of my mom and Aunty Darlene as they whispered to each other and played in the yard. There I was waving goodbye to my great grandmother, dressed for the city, as she boarded a float plane leaving Bamfield. The salt hangs in air while we all scramble together on the rocky beaches, pilot the boats, and proudly display the day's catch. When I delve into these albums, I am no longer an observer, I am a participant, I am transported to another time and place.

When Aunty Babe could no longer live in Bamfield on her own, she moved to Nanaimo and eventually in with her daughter. She filled her bedroom walls with framed images—the very same ones from her albums. And as time slowly took pieces of her away from us and her mind began to lose its grasp on the present day, those photographs were a comfort. Being free to live, once again, in those moments where she could hear the laughter over the waves as her kids played in the sand around her, eased the uncertainty of her confusion.

Aunty Babe has since passed, and her albums are more freely available for viewing these days. But, although I am now an adult—usually with clean hands—I have never cracked a cover without first silently asking permission. Some things in this life are sacred. 📷



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