Crossing the Digital Divide (v141)
Cloud Friendly
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for the Observer

Busy week with the holidays, visiting relatives, visiting relativity, and all those things in between. This week, I'll repeat my routine backup to USB instructions for those of you who have yet to back up their computers. For those of you who haven't, please consider using a Cloud storage provider if you've got only a few Gigabytes worth of documents/pictures you cannot lose.

The Cloud really is nothing more than an Internet connected data center with hundreds of "white box" computer servers and a high-availability storage area network. In simple terms, whether Dropbox, iCloud, GoogleDrive, OneBox, Adrive, Box, Amazon or at least as many others, your "account" is hidden behind industrial strength firewalls, has operating system protections against multiple logins, and security measures, like two-factor authentication to insure you that you are the only one to "see" your files. Remember, Data Centers are typically windowless buildings, have generators to backup power, have alarm systems to keep out intruders, and have more redundancy in their servers and backup pools than most of us will ever spend on computer technology. The Cloud is live whether or not your satellite is working, and is usually accessible from your computer, smartphone, or a web-interface. Safe, secure, and available – isn't that what we had hoped for?

We live in a small community, rich in oral history, large in open source, exposed to most of the elements. Many of us grew up learning penmanship, typing with carbon paper (ever wonder where that cc: in email came from?), and savoring photographs. A roll of film would enable a motivated photographer to capture 12, 24 or 36 images, then wait several days to "develop" or process the film into photographs. Film technology has virtually been destroyed by digital optics and storage. A generation or so ago, photo albums provided visual history, a portal back in time.

We've learned many things from archivists, preservationists, and art historians. Very few "man-made items" survive the test of time. Ink on parchment fades, papers become brittle, or rodent fodder, moisture and mold often do them in. I picked up several pointers that relate to both legacy and modern media:

Plastic containers should never be used to store paper, photos, or digital media.
Adhesives, and fasteners should be avoided: adhesives fail, fasteners rust.
Paper and photos should be stored in non-acid cardboard storage boxes. They breathe.
Storage boxes should be kept in a cool, DRY, dark space, with an even temperature.
Video, 8mm, 16mm tapes should be copied to DVD.

Digital archival procedures begin with a copy – unlike media of old, there's nothing lost when copying a document, photo, video, or pdf (and anything like that). Copy once, copy thrice, it matters not to the file. Copying digital files requires little more than a 'drag and drop' from folder to device, or folder to folder.

I hope I haven't lost anyone yet.

Do you have a USB Flash drive?

A USB flash drive, also variously known as a thumb drive, pen drive, gig stick, jump drive, disk key, disk on key, flash-drive, memory stick, USB stick or USB memory, is a data storage device that includes flash memory with an integrated USB interface.

Go buy one (or more) Flash/Thumb/USB drives, look for at least 8GB, 16GB or 32GB capacity, they aren't that expensive. When you get it home, unwrap the device and insert the drive into a USB port (Blue or Yellow) on your computer. Windows will present you with a pop-up box, asking if you want to import pictures, install software, or other such tasks. You want to "open folder or open with finder". This should give you a window showing the contents of your thumb drive. There may be one or two files there, depending on which manufacturers' product you have.

Backup your pictures now: open the pictures folder, select all, copy, then move your mouse over to the new folder for the thumb drive. Paste the pictures (or photo albums) into that folder. Be patient, it might take some time if you have a lot of pictures.

You can do the same thing with your Documents.

Once you've closed the folder window opened when you inserted the thumb drive, you can safely remove it from your computer by "ejecting". If you can't find the USB symbol in your taskbar or desktop, close any open application (web, folder, word, etc.), then remove the device. Your computer will warn you that you might lose data if you don't eject properly, but if you've got nothing opened (picture, document, folder view, etc.) from the thumb drive, there's no data to corrupt. You can safely ignore the suggestion.

Now, take the second USB Thumb drive you bought and copy the same items. Take this second key and put it in your gun safe, safety deposit box, grandma's jewelry box, or anywhere but the same place the first key is stored.

Take the first key, put it into the computer, open to view the folder, and make sure you have pictures and documents on the device. (verification step).

Control those things you can, and keep the surprises to a minimum.