

Cameras in the Streets: The Use and Evolution of Photography in Kansas, 1839-1950

An Essay
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This paper is an in-depth documentation of where Kansas falls into the grand scheme of photography as the trend of hobby photography swept across the nation and the globe. This is accomplished by examining the different kinds of cameras that were used in early photography and by also examining trends in the nation as a whole, the state of Kansas, and finally, in a case study of the city of Clifton, Clay County, Kansas.

Introduction:

Photography is more than just a hobby; it is a method of recording history that has done wonders for the documentation of rural Kansas communities. Beyond stock photography and the visual recording of events such as parades, debates, and other special events, photography in Kansas has been used, by amateur photographers, as well as professionals, to capture images of life as it happens naturally; the result is an array of photos from various time periods that accurately depict life in the past as how it actually was, not simply the straight-faced portrait. This is thanks to photographers such as Otto Kratzer of Alta Vista, Kansas, and J. J. Pennell of Junction City, Kansas, who spent much of their lives taking photographs of their home towns. Photography has so impacted Kansas and its residents that the state is home to one of the largest camera collections in the world, the Luebs Camera Collection, held in the Washington County Historical Society, Washington, Kansas. The collection contains over 650 cameras that were accrued by a native Kansan, John W. Luebs, who donated his collection of cameras to the historical society as he neared the end of his life. These cameras range from early box cameras all the way to more modern models, which begin with film cameras and progress to digital and even a large movie camera. Though such a large collection of cameras exists in Kansas, cameras didn't appear in the state until the early 1850s.¹ It would be difficult to cover the history of Kansas photography without first giving a brief overview of the processes of photography and their origins.

¹ Taft, Robert. "A Photographic History of Early Kansas" *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* (1937-1977) 3 (1934):3-14.



Figure 1: A classic Daguerreotype photograph of two unnamed women. Courtesy of Dr. M.J. Morgan of Chapman Center for Rural Studies.

The first practical and widely used process for capturing images using a camera was the French made daguerreotype developed by Louis Daguerre in 1837 and then unveiled to the public in 1839.² The daguerreotype is a process that required the photographer to polish a sheet of silver-plated copper, make the surface sensitive to light through the use of fumes, expose the sheet to light with the aid of a camera, fuming the sheet of copper with mercury vapor to make the latent image visible, and then removing its sensitivity to light through the use of chemicals before putting it on display.³ Daguerreotypes became rivaled by the use of glass plates to capture photographs in the late 1850s, with the first instance of glass plate photography being introduced in 1857 on what was known as a collodion plate, which was essentially the same process as a daguerreotype but on a wet or dry glass plate. The process of wet glass plates took about fifteen

² Hannay, John, ed. (2013). *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*. Routledge. p. 365

³ Burgess, N.G. (June 1855). "Amusing Incidents in the Life of a Daguerrean Artist". *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal*. 8 (6): 190.

minutes, while dry plates took significantly longer and were used primarily for shots of landscapes. It wasn't until 1878 that a process was developed that allowed for an "instantaneous" photo to be developed. The process included a heat-ripened gel emulsion that greatly increased the light sensitivity of the plates. Glass plate photography remained the most commonly used camera technique until 1885, when George Eastman invented a film based camera called the Kodak. From the time that film cameras were invented, they dominated the realm of photography. Though they went through various changes and became more and more compact, the basic process was the same until the development and distribution of digital cameras starting in 1981.⁴

It should be noted, for the reader's benefit, that this essay has been broken up into three sections named for three kinds of shot angles. The first section is called "Long Shot," taking its name from the camera angle of the same name. This specific angle is used, for example, to take a picture of someone's entire family, and is used in this instance to denote that the section is taking a look at American photography as a whole. The second section, "Medium Shot," is named for the camera angle that is slightly more focused than a long shot; it would be used to take a photograph of just an individual member rather than an entire family. This section is named such because it is looking at photography specifically in Kansas. The concluding section is called "Close Shot," a camera angle used to take fine detail pictures of a specific part of a person, such as a headshot. This section was titled as such because it is looking at specific part of Kansas, Clifton in Clay County, and is following a case study of one particular photographer there. These are not to be confused with snapshots, which is a term coined when film cameras became more

⁴ Peres, Michael R. (2008). *The concise Focal encyclopedia of photography: from the first photo on paper to the digital revolution*. Burlington, Mass.: Focal Press/Elsevier, p. 75.

widely used because it became as simple as pointing and “snapping” a picture. Photographers did not have to wait fifteen minutes or more to have the plates of glass or tin be burned with light.⁵

Cameras have had a profound effect on how we record and perceive history. Prior to the invention of the above processes, the only visuals that we had of the events in our past were paintings and drawings, many of which were drawn from memory or after hearing or reading a detailed description of the event. These were not always accurate, or they would alter the truth of the event in order to show a more courageous view, such as George Washington in the painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware” painted by Emanuel Leutze in 1851.⁶

Long Shot: Photography in the United States

In the United States photography had many uses. It was used for business purposes, as a medium of art, and, of course, to document history. Each of these purposes had its own special means for production, means of distribution, and audience that they were directed to.

Photography began its flowering in America with the advent of the daguerreotype in 1839, as it was the first form of photography introduced in the country. It evolved slowly but surely over time to involve glass plates, gel emulsion, and film.

Photography in America began as a means of artwork that many feared would overshadow the traditional style of art and artist. It wasn't until 1855 that this fear was overcome and people began to see how photography could be used, not as a means of replacement, but instead, as stated in an article published that year, “as a most important auxiliary to the resources

⁵ *The Snapshot Aesthetic* (Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles, n.d.).

⁶ Spassky, Natalie (1985). “Washington Crossing the Delaware”. *American Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born between 1816 and 1845*. 2. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. pp. 17–18.

of an artist.”⁷ This fear was overcome when the art community came to the realization that while the camera was an excellent tool for capturing and copying images, it was good for only that; it was incapable of innovating and creating new art. The only form of art that photography truly overshadowed was that of the engraver, as photographs began to replace images in books that would have previously been drawn or engraved.⁸ As an auxiliary to other forms of artwork, it was used to capture landscapes, poses, architecture, and more that it would have taken the conventional artist hours or days to capture. The quick photographs, averaging fifteen or so minutes, would then allow for the conventional artist to take them and reproduce them at their own leisure.



Figure 2: A glass plate negative portrait of an unknown man taken by Merrill J. Barnhard near Vining, KS. Circa 1900. Notice the wink and smile; this pose would have to have been held for a sustained period averaging fifteen minutes. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

⁷ "Photography." *The Crayon* 1, no. 11 (1855): 170.

⁸ "Photography." *The Crayon* 1, no. 11 (1855): 170.

That is not to say that photography was not a form of artwork in and of itself. It was often used to capture photographs of people. Mathew Brady, a famous photographer from 1844 to roughly 1875, is testament to that.⁹ In 1844, Brady lived in New York City where he produced cases for daguerreotypes and eventually began a miniature gallery of daguerreotypes. In 1850 he started a studio in Washington DC where he began to photograph important politicians such as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster.¹⁰

Cameras played a large part in business endeavor as well, as they were used for the purposes of instruction booklets, hiring processes, and advertisements. Companies used them as well as working individuals, such as Frederick Winslow Taylor, the founder of an industrial and managerial movement that was known as Taylorism.¹¹ Taylor focused his work on steel manufacturing and the desire to increase production rates via his own smithing techniques and tools as well as by using a slide-rule, stopwatch, and instruction card to limit a worker's control over the work. He eventually, in 1906, published *On the Art of Cutting Metals*, which used several halftone images to show the processes of certain metal cutting techniques.¹² The treatise was revolutionary for its time, but it also showed limitations on photographs being used to illustrate instructional pieces, as so much is left out.

The camera was also instrumental for recording history in America even early on in its existence. Some of the most stunning and influential photographs of the country's history, especially its military history, was thanks to brave men and women who travelled with armies for

⁹ "Photograph of President Abraham Lincoln." World Digital Library. Retrieved 3 May 2017.

¹⁰ Meredith, Roy, and Mathew Brady. *Mathew Brady's Portrait of an Era*. 1st ed. New York City, NY: W W Norton and Co. Inc., 1985.

¹¹ Brown, Elspeth H. *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884-1929*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

¹²Ibid.

the sake of capturing the conflict. During the American Civil War, one of the most distinguished photographic collections of the carnage that the war brought forth was from Mather Brady, mentioned earlier for his work with daguerreotype portraits. He and a team of compatriots that aided him travelled with the Union army from as early as the First Battle of Bull Run.¹³ In 1862, Brady unveiled to the public the true atrocity of the war by displaying photographs of the dead after the Battle of Antietam. The impact that these photographs had on the nation was summed up in a *New York Times* article in the same year: “Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it...”¹⁴

It is in these ways that America has benefitted greatly from the use and development of the camera, for it has been responsible for more than just uses regarding pleasure. It has been responsible for innovative strides in artistry. Photography has innovated the workplace, giving new ways to increase production methods in the industrial centers of America. Most importantly, the use of cameras has been responsible for the preservation of American history.

Medium Shot: Photography in Kansas

Photography extended its reach into Kansas in the early 1850s and spread quickly around the state, becoming a popular pastime for many people in large cities and small towns alike. The reasons for the mass spreading of camera use is not entirely clear; however, there are some

¹³ Meredith, Roy, *Mathew Brady's Portrait of an Era*, 1st ed. (New York City, NY: W W Norton and Co. Inc., 1985).

¹⁴ “Brady’s Photographs.; Pictures of the Dead at Antietam.” *The New York Times*, 1862.

documented cases of photographers in early Kansas on expeditions and casual journeys alike. The very first of these expeditions that had the aid of photography was headed by Colonel John C. Fremont in 1853.¹⁵ The photographer in this case was S. N. Carvalho, who took his pictures as daguerreotypes. It is also worthwhile to note that it is very likely that on September 17th or 18th of the same year, the first photo competition took place in Kansas Territory. Colonel Fremont had allowed a second photographer, Mr. Bomar, who used wax paper negatives, to accompany the expedition as far as the Westport area of Kansas. Once there, Fremont requested both Bomar and Carvalho to take photos using their respective methods to allow him to choose which he would take with him further on his expedition west. The result was that Fremont ruled in favor of the daguerreotype as it took less water and time to produce photographs that were of a higher quality than Bomar's wax paper negatives.¹⁶

There are few existing daguerreotypes from Fremont's and Carvalho's expedition due to a fire that destroyed most of Fremont's personal effects. However, it was slightly after the end of his expedition, in 1854, that a wave of other daguerreotype photographers entered the state. They weren't known for their daguerreotypes of views or specific incidents nearly as much as they were known for their portraiture photographs, most of which occurred in the years between 1854 and 1860.

In the time of the Civil War, photography interest in Kansas made no spectacular advancements. People no doubt still admired photographs, and photographers no doubt continued to grow in number. One of the only notable photographs produced in the time period was that of an emigrant train being pulled by oxen on the route west on Poyntz Avenue,

¹⁵ Taft, Robert. "A Photographic History of Early Kansas" *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* (1937-1977) 3 (1934):3-14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Manhattan, Kansas.¹⁷ The photograph was well known and reproduced on postcards via lithographic processes.

It wasn't until the close of the Civil War that photography in Kansas began to pick up pace again. The cause was the beginning of railroad construction through the state and an increase in demand for authentic photographs of Kansas lands for the purpose of advertising to those who were looking to move westward. One distinguished photographer in the late 1860s was Alexander Gardner. Gardner was a colleague of Matthew Brady during the Civil War, travelling with the Army of the Potomac until the war ended.¹⁸ In 1868, Gardner travelled with the Union Pacific Railroad, which was being constructed through Kansas at the time. In his time through Kansas, Gardner collected over one hundred and fifty photos of different views and institutions in the state.¹⁹

It was late in the century before people began to have much easier access to plate based cameras, as well as the advent of gel emulsion dry plates, which were substantially more affordable than wet plates and the chemicals needed for them.²⁰ This ease of access and development, as photographers began developing plates for others, made it significantly easier for more common people to take photographs of object they wanted to, instead of just looking at photos that other people had taken. This allowed for a significant bloom in the number and type of photographs taken around Kansas.

¹⁷ Taft, Robert. "A Photographic History of Early Kansas" *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* (1937-1977) 3 (1934):3-14.

¹⁸ Lee, Anthony W. *On Alexander Gardner's photographic sketch book of the Civil War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 63.

¹⁹ Taft, Robert. "A Photographic History of Early Kansas" *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* (1937-1977) 3 (1934):3-14.

²⁰Eder, Josef M. *History of Photography*. Translated by Edward Epstean. 3rd ed. (New York City, NY: Dover Publications Inc, 1978).

One such case of impressive photography from amateurs who were able to purchase a glass plate negative camera in 1899, is the McColm siblings. G. E. McColm and Viola McColm were Kansas locals who lived around the Topeka area at the turn of the century. Instead of taking portrait pictures, the McColms took their camera out into nature to take pictures of wildlife, landscapes and many other aspects of nature. Their work was so recognized that it has been published in floral magazines, the *Kansas City Star*, and *Club Member*.²¹

Close-Up: Photography in Clifton

Of such importance was the preservation of rural life in Kansas to some of its residents that they went to the extremes in attempts to capture how life was in small towns of Kansas. One of the most photographically documented towns in Kansas is one in on the border of Washington and Clay Counties, formed in 1870; Clifton continues to exist to this day. Its landscape and many structures have been the subject of a number of postcard companies wishing to distribute images of the town around the state and country. The town's people and some events have been documented by one individual living in the immediate area around his community.

A number of companies have traveled through Clifton over several years and during different seasons in order to photograph it and sometimes, its occupants. The cameras that were

²¹ Meeker, Grace R. "Nature Photography in Kansas: The Work of Mr. and Miss McColm." *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science*, 20, 1906, 277-800.



Figure 3: A Photograph of Clifton, Kansas' main street as published on a postcard by H.G. Zimmerman, circa 1900. Notice the reddish color of the sunset; this was accomplished by the use of a limited RGB color pallet. Photo courtesy of George Kisby and the Clifton Historical Society.

used were most likely film cameras that printed large, postcard-size negatives that were copied onto postcards at a later time. Some companies that passed through Clifton and published a number of their postcards include H.G. Zimmerman & Co., M.L. Zercher Book and Stationery Company, and J. Bowers Postcard Co. Of these three, H.G. Zimmerman made significantly more interesting postcards as he used a limited RGB color pallet to color in the black and white image before it was transferred onto a postcard. On the other hand, J. Bowers has a significantly larger collection of different photographs of Clifton.

Both of these companies appear to have documented the town in close intervals, with most of their postcards being in circulation between 1906 and 1910. The major differences in these postcards, other than H.G. Zimmerman's color pallet, is what the photographs depicted. Zimmerman has only four postcards of Clifton in circulation, from the research to date. M. L. Zercher had roughly twelve Clifton postcards produced and in circulation, most of them lone

buildings around the town. J. Bowers had at least 24 postcards in circulation, most of those of individual buildings, shots of Main Street, and a few elevated photos that showed a wide shot of the town from above.

While these postcard companies did a good job of documenting the town buildings, they failed to document how life was lived in this small town, which could be an archetype for other small towns around Kansas. Fortunately for Clifton and the historic and photographic community as a whole, one man, Merrill J. Barnhard, a local resident of Vining, Kansas, produced one of the most complete photo collections of life in Clifton at the turn of the century. During his time living around Clifton, Barnhard accrued close to one thousand photos of individuals, events, and landscapes in and around the town. The method that he used was a box camera using a glass plate to capture negatives that he could later transfer onto paper.



Figure 4: A photograph of Merrill J. Barnhard (Left), his wife, and son in their home, circa 1900. Taken with a glass plate negative camera. Photo Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

Barnhard was born in Ottawa, Kansas, on April 22, 1876 and he lived in Clifton between 1898 and 1924.²² In Clifton he worked professionally as a blacksmith but took up an interest in photography in the early twentieth century when he purchased his first glass-plate camera. With this camera he took photos of his family, people who lived in his area, a Missouri Pacific train wreck and so much more. There are numerous photos of unidentified men, women, and children, taken as portraiture work in the possession of the Kansas State Historical Society, although it is unclear if he was paid for these photos or if he created them simply because he wanted to. He is responsible for the community of Clifton today having an accurate glimpse of the past, and proves that amateur photographers who lived in Kansas were vital to the immortalization of the state, its small towns, and the inhabitants of these towns.



Figure 4: A photograph of a Missouri Pacific railway wreck near Vining, Ks. Taken by Merrill J. Barnhard, circa 1900. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

²² "Barnhard Photograph Collection." Kansas State Historical Society. Accessed November 05, 2016. <http://www.kshs.org/archives/218801>.

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