

# A New Tool for a New History

*Hermine Munz Baumhofer*

THE INTERPRETATION of our history has changed within the last fifty years. Until Frederick J. Turner arrived on the scene, the American historian turned his face away from the West and bowed deeply to the East and to Europe. The mosaic of American growth beyond the Mississippi, made up of many small, humble, and earthy events, held little glamour or interest for scholars. Not until the frontier had been established for a generation and the sons born on the frontier began to analyze the land in which they grew up—not until then could a true evaluation of the American West appear.

Turner, born in Wisconsin, stimulated this new viewpoint; others followed. Still others enlarged the study of America, until now there is presented to us an integrated history of the country, one in which "Sweet Betsy from Pike" who crossed the big mountain is as important in her sphere as Monroe is in his. Now we give thought to the geological predestination for the flow of American culture, the development of specific types of culture, the ingenious modifications and adjustments made by the frontiersmen. The entire social and economic development of the continent is now brought into focus. The story of land and cattle, of the breaking of the prairie sod, of the machinery needed to push the frontier farther west, now becomes of value to the student of American history. These stories, however, are not told only in farmers' diaries, in courthouse records, and land office papers; these stories are most graphically told in pictures. Photography is truly a willing and able tool for our new historiography.

The rapid development of photography coincided in time with the movement of the frontier westward across the prairies. Before the frontiersman left the East, he often had a photograph made of himself to leave with his friends and family. When he had cleared a little land and built his soddy or log house, he was always eager

to have the itinerant photographer perpetuate his achievements. The military forts, the first churches or schools, the new little community were all grist to the mill of passing photographers. The Indian, though suspicious, posed for him. The rising politician settled proudly in the uncomfortable chair in the photographer's gallery and tried to look as Napoleonic as possible. Photography, however, does not only mirror facts; it also perpetuates the spirit of a period. Among the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society there can be found many photographs of men and women standing proudly before their new sod houses. The women, in crisply starched white aprons, are often barefoot or ill shod. The dim photographs bring home to us the privations and the immeasurable odds against which these pioneers fought. But they also show the frontiersmen's indomitable courage and their pride in their achievements. No description or monograph carries the impact that these photographs have for us. This is not the shadow of the past, but its substance. This fact is not yet sufficiently accepted by the historian.

Photography used as a tool in the writing of history is like any tool, its value depends on the amount of skill with which it is operated. Many researchers do not recognize its value or potentialities, and consider photographs of marginal value. The biographer, for instance, will pounce with happy cries on any letter, manuscript, or printed work that was created by his subject. He will be sure that now he can penetrate his subject's personality. But the written legacy left by the great and near-great is often a slightly distorted reflection of the author's personality. The more important the document, the more does the author clothe himself with a dignity or a personality somewhat foreign to his everyday life. His written words are the Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes of his mind. On the other hand, a photograph of the great man would give the biographer a better insight into his subject. The cut of his mouth, the look in his eyes, the lift of his chin — there is the man as he really was. In our minds we see our pre-photographic history like a Valhalla of handsome heroic figures. But there is no painting more powerful than a photograph of Abraham Lincoln that shows his every wrinkle, his sad eyes, and his gnarled hands.

Scholars are often of the opinion that photographs are rather frivolous; they will not think of pictorial material in terms of documentation for their theses. The fact is, however, that the scholar often uses photographs in a manner lacking both skill and discernment. He will include some interesting pictures in order to stimulate a wider market for his books. But, alas, very often he is not too careful to check the accuracy of his captions, the exact period of his illustrations, or the organic connection between his illustrations and his text. He is more interested in enlivening his text than in producing evidence for it. All too frequently the author leaves the selection to his publisher, who in turn uses pictures that he can procure easily before the deadline for the book. Or the author may turn over the problem of finding suitable illustrative material to a young, untrained research assistant, whereas he uses extreme care in selecting manuscript material or printed source material. He does not recognize photographs as facsimile documents that should be selected with equal care. The scholar is also precise in giving citations for any textual source that he uses for reference. But his pictorial material is thrown in with the text as a jackknife used to be thrown in with the purchase of a boy's suit.

In the beginning, photography was used primarily as evidence and not as an art form or a craft. The greatest fascination that early photography had for its admirers was the fact that it copies scenes and forms without change or distortion and fixes them permanently for the observer. This was akin to the pleasure a child feels when it sees in the mirror a copy of itself that can be viewed objectively. This exact duplication, possible through the new technique, was soon utilized by the government of the United States in order to collect evidence or documentation for many of its functions and activities. A number of these collections of documentary photographs are now in the National Archives.

In 1868 the United States Geological Survey investigated the Comstock Lode in Nevada. Timothy H. O'Sullivan, the photographer, accompanied the survey and took pictures of the mines above and below the ground, making, hundreds of feet below the surface, some of the earliest photographs created by magnesium light. When

Clarence King surveyed the fortieth parallel, O'Sullivan packed his glass plates over much difficult and uncharted terrain in Nevada, Utah, and Idaho in order to bring back evidence of what had been surveyed. The navy sent an expedition to the Isthmus of Darien in 1870 to explore the possibilities of a canal across that narrow strip of land. A photographer again went along to bring back pictorial evidence for a later materialization of the project in the construction of the Panama Canal.

Photographers accompanied Lieutenant George M. Wheeler on his survey of the Indian territories in the early 1870's. Their photographs, made under great difficulties, are not tourist pictures, but factual representations of the Indian lands. The surprise is that these early photographs are so exceedingly good. They seem much superior to photographs made at the present time for similar purposes. The early photographer carried all his glass plates, chemicals, and other equipment with him. Every morning he loaded all these on his mules and unloaded again whenever he found a spot that he thought was worth recording. He prepared his plates on the spot and developed them immediately. Under these circumstances, the photographer washed off his failures and used the plates over again, until he had a picture that was worth packing and "toting" for thousands of miles, many of them vertical. The pictures that he brought back are, therefore, not only true, but also of great aesthetic value, and they should not be overlooked in the writing of our history.

Photography was used not only on trips of exploration; it was utilized in many other activities of the government. Such early photographic records may be found today in many government departments. It is significant in this connection to see what material exists that pertains to the history of Minnesota.

Among the records of the war department now in the National Archives there are some very interesting photographs relating to Minnesota. During the Civil War many political and military figures in Washington sat for their portraits in the galleries of Mathew B. Brady. Among them were several representatives from the North Star State — Alexander Ramsey, Judge Benjamin B. Meeker, Colonel

Mark L. Dunnell, and others. Although these portraits were not originally records of the government, they were considered to be of great documentary value for the Civil War period and were purchased by the war department and incorporated in its records. The quartermaster general in the Civil War ordered photographs to be made of buildings that could be used as hospitals or barracks and of military installations in various states. Among the resulting pictures are several views of Fort Snelling as it appeared in 1864. Many other photographs of the fort and of military personnel stationed there were made in the decades following the war. One of these shows the Crow Indian chiefs imprisoned at Fort Snelling in 1887. Faded views of the White Earth Indian Reservation in its early years may also be found in the war department records. Other views show members of the Thirteenth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry training in Georgia during the Spanish-American War, and the same unit participating in the campaign in the Philippine Islands. During the First World War the Signal Corps photographers portrayed the activities of the 151st Field Artillery of the famed Rainbow Division in France. This unit consisted of members of the Minnesota National Guard. Photographs of Liberty Loan drives, Red Cross parades, and special training for war at the University of Minnesota and at the Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis were collected by the Army War College to document civilian activities at home during the First World War.

Other government agencies concerned themselves with people and events in the state. The Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution has an extensive collection of photographs of Chippewa and other Indians who lived and fought in this area. The Bureau of Fisheries, in a survey of the fishing industry about 1895, photographed the establishments of fisheries at Duluth and of fishing boats on Lake Superior.

The office of the supervising architect of the United States, in charge of maintaining public buildings, such as post offices and courthouses in the states, has among its records photographs showing the construction of such buildings from the selection of the site to the final completed structure. Since these progress photographs

exist for certain Minnesota cities from 1892 to the present, we can get an occasional glimpse of the appearance of such places as St. Paul or Duluth as they looked about the turn of the century.

The department of agriculture recorded rural activities in connection with extension work and miscellaneous farm investigations. By this method the portrait of many a Minnesota prize pig or potato found its way to the official files. But there are also views of farmsteads and rural activities in parts of Minnesota that were settled comparatively recently. One of these areas is the northern part of St. Louis County, for which photographs of the clearing of the land and settlement activities provide a clear record of the problems of many earlier settlers in the Middle West.

This is only a sampling of pictorial source material for the writing of state histories to be found in government archives. In the wider national scene, the government continued its use of photography as documentary material on an ever-increasing scale. No major activity of the various agencies remains undocumented by the camera. Although there has developed in some fields a tendency toward interpretive photography, the majority of the government photographs are factual. It is only necessary to think of the extensive use of aerial photography developed since the First World War. The government has even gone a step farther by requiring that progress photographs be submitted by businessmen who work under government contracts. Now no government plan is complete without a thorough preliminary coverage by photography, whether it relates to military operation, the construction of regional flood controls, or a new expedition to the Antarctic.

Business also utilizes photography as evidence. The businessman sells his merchandise at home and abroad and accompanies his sales campaign by photographs showing not only how best to use his product, but also the maximum and minimum conditions under which it will function. It may sometimes seem to the buyer, however, that in occasional sales campaigns the photographs used are somewhat interpretive. If a factory looks for a new location, it does not study local conditions and facilities only by personal contacts or with the help of statistics or maps, but also by the use of

pictorial material. Some of the newest and most vital tools in research institutions and testing laboratories are color photographs, X-rays, and photomicrography. Communication and transportation industries study photographs of models of radios or airplanes or other machinery that have long been discarded in order to salvage ideas that are again usable with new technical advances.

Public administration is not unaware of the virtues of photography as evidence. When a city plans a slum clearance project and submits it for budgetary benediction to the city fathers, the plan is sure to be amply illustrated by photographs. When a car grazes a poor, hapless pedestrian, the police will take pictures of the skid-marks left by the car. When the photographs are brought forth in court, there is no doubt in our minds that they are evidence.

If the government, industry, and the public administrator consider photographs as prime evidence, why should the scholar hesitate to make use of such a valuable tool? Carefully selected illustrations will not only assist the historian in telling his story — they will also make his story dramatic. They will help him develop his thesis and translate it from the purely theoretical to a more concrete level and thereby help the reader grasp its significance. Photographs may even add “box-office appeal,” and no one who has spent much time and effort on a book should sneer at an enlarged circle of readers.

Many institutions are glad to assist the scholar in his search for documentary pictures and able to help him in his selection. Almost all government agencies have photographic libraries with material pertaining to their activities. The National Archives and the Library of Congress can be especially helpful in supplying photographs of historical significance. The public library of any large city or town, as well as the many historical societies, should be consulted for regional material. Special libraries, such as that of the Association of American Railroads in Washington, often make available photographic files on specific subjects. Besides these public and semipublic institutions, there are also many commercial picture agencies that can be consulted.

After the photographs are found, the problem of selection follows.

Photographs should always be chosen for their pertinency rather than their beauty or condition. The period should be carefully checked, since a photograph chosen without accuracy will cast doubt on the soundness of a whole work. It is as necessary to check the authenticity of a photograph as it is to check the correctness of textual source material. Thus a photograph should be treated like a paper document; the correct caption and the exact date should be supplied, as well as full information concerning its source. In this way the new history will not only be illustrated—it will be documented. The Greeks tried to make their pillars attractive as well as utilitarian, and the scholar should not shun evidence even though it has aesthetic values.



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