JOSEPH JAY BRECHET, a Glencoe, Minnesota, merchant and amateur photographer, began taking pictures probably in the mid-1890s. For the most part, he focused on those things closest to him: his family, his home, his businesses, the town, the surrounding countryside. The years in which he took most of his pictures seem to have been happy and prosperous ones for Brechet and his family. There is vigor, exuberance, charm, and optimism here, as well as considerable artistic ability.

Brechet apparently brought to his avocation the same qualities he applied to his successful general merchandise business — intelligence, knowledge, dedication, and exacting standards. "That was the way he did everything," his daughter Bertha Marie (now Mrs. John D. Boyd) remarked recently of his approach to photography.

Brechet was, according to the Illustrated Album of Biography of Meeker and McLeod Counties (Chicago, 1888), a "self-made man in the fullest sense of the word." He was born in 1860 in Buffalo, New York, and in 1867 his family moved west, settling first in Minneapolis and four or five years later in McLeod County. From about the age of seventeen, Brechet worked for merchants in Glencoe, in towns in Wisconsin, North Dakota, Iowa, and then back to Glencoe, where he bought out his former employer, C. T. Buchanan. Mrs. Boyd says he bought the store over a period of time, paying Buchanan a portion of his wages. He owned it by 1888, when, in the county history, he was called "one of the heaviest merchants in this section of the State." He and his brother Bernard ("Barney") also owned a store in nearby Hector.

He was then twenty-eight and still living at home. A relative who lived in Buffalo, New York, arranged a correspondence between him and Jennie C. Frankenstein, a young woman in that eastern city. Letters went back and forth, and then Brechet decided to make a visit to the city of his birth. Two weeks later, in February, 1889, Jennie and Joseph were married, and Brechet brought his bride back to Glencoe to live. In December, 1889, Bertha Marie Julia was born, and in 1893 Jay Carl was born.

Most of these pictures apparently were taken during Bertha Marie's and Carl's childhood years in a period from about 1895 to shortly after the turn of the century. After that time, Brechet seems to have lost interest in photography or no longer had the time for it. Young Carl was growing up, and Brechet decided the boy would need wider business opportunities than those provided in McLeod County. In 1909, with his brother Barney and Harry Richter, he formed the Brechet and Richter Company in Minneapolis, a bakery supply firm. Joseph Brechet was president — although in the first year he was listed in the Minneapolis city directory as still living in Glencoe. By 1910 the family had moved to Minneapolis. Carl was a clerk in the firm which was to be his some day; Bertha Marie was a student at the University of Minnesota. Unhappily, in that year, when Carl was seventeen, he died of tuberculosis.
Cousins and best friends Bertha Louise Mann and Bertha Marie Brechet were both frequent photographic subjects. The Manns, from Cincinnati, visited their Glencoe relatives every summer.

Bertha Marie and her reflection in the looking glass in her father's store.

Jay Carl Brechet

Jennie Brechet
WHEAT FIELDS provide the setting for this family photograph. From left are Aunt Mamie Mann, Mrs. Brechet, Bertha Louise, Bertha Marie, Burr Mann, and Carl.

THE ELEGANT Brechet house in Glencoe was completed in 1899. The family lived in a smaller house on the property during its construction. Brechet hired a Chicago architect to design it. The house still stands, but it has lost most of its elegance.

BELOW LEFT: An unidentified woman poses on the porch of the Brechet house. Cobblestones were brought by horse and wagon from the nearby countryside. Below right: A view from one parlor into the second parlor gives a suggestion of the beautiful furnishings. The woman at the piano is not identified.
HUSKING CORN while tending children were all in a day's work for this unidentified woman.

A STORE INTERIOR — probably one of Brechet's

Scattered photographs from the post-Glencoe years survive: Bertha Marie as a young college student, photographs taken during a trip Joseph and Jennie made in 1917, an occasional picture of the Brechet and Richter Company. But the heart of this collection is from the years 1895-97 to about 1902-03, estimating by the ages of the children and the Brechet house's completion in 1899.

One of the little girls who appears in many of these pictures is Brechet's daughter, Mrs. Boyd, who now lives in Edina. In 1970 she donated the glass negatives from which these prints were made to the audio-visual division of the Minnesota Historical Society. She provided most of the information about and identification of people and places in the pictures.

This is a rich photographic collection, of which only a few pictures are shown here. It provides a look into the lives, the work, the play, the leisure pursuits of one affluent family living in a small town at the turn of the century. It informs researchers about details of Victorian house interiors, about clothes ("dress-up" clothes, to be sure, for Brechet portrayed his family at its best), about how small towns looked, and about agricultural life.

But the pictures inform our aesthetic sensibilities as well. We can not only appreciate their beauty, but we become aware of the perceptions, the affections, and the concerns of Joseph Brechet. For a moment, we can stand where he stood and see with his eyes.