

Photographers Mathias O. Bue and Walter T. Oxley

CYNTHIA ELYCE RUBIN

In the early-twentieth century, as the medium of photography came of age in Minnesota, independent, small-town professional photographers played an integral role. During this age of continued mobility, photography studios followed settlement westward, producing portraits that helped settlers maintain ties with families and friends left behind. Among the dozens of photographers plying their trade in the state were Mathias O. Bue (1889–1969) in Lanesboro (Fillmore County) and Walter Thomas Oxley (1872–1955) in Fergus Falls (Otter Tail County).¹

From the moment that Louis-Jacques Mondé Daguerre announced his invention in 1839, the new craft captured the imagination of the American public as well as innovators who borrowed and improved on its techniques. The “dry plate” process invented around 1880 eliminated much of the inconvenience of taking photographs. Other breakthroughs followed, and after entrepreneur George Eastman introduced the simple Kodak in 1888, photography’s popularity soared.

Like many rural citizens today, photographers Bue and Oxley worked in a profession where income was directly tied to their communities’ fortunes, and they often needed more than one job to make ends meet. Taking advantage of technologies that simplified their work and improved the quality of photographs, they challenged the norm of portrait photography, working in genres far beyond that realm. Since portrait work was sporadic at best, many studio photographers tried to expand their horizons in hopes of turning a profit. As one explained in *Abel’s Photographic Weekly* (1909), “If I sat down in my gallery and waited for trade, I should grow slim.”²

Although from different backgrounds, both Bue and

Oxley adapted to photography’s wider role in the social and cultural scene by complementing indoor portraiture with innovative photographic expressions. Both were solid, all-around photographers who eagerly undertook any size job, working tirelessly to produce individual portraits and group photographs of school classes, clubs, and church and civic associations. In addition, Bue nurtured his Norwegian roots to produce specialized images for sale to a Norwegian American audience. Oxley, on the other hand, sold series of panoramic photographs of local events and disasters, documented Fergus Falls construction sites, and traveled to distant regions on behalf of land companies. In addition, both men took advantage of a national postcard craze to create real-photo postcards, developed and printed one-at-a-time in the darkroom.

Manuals and trade journals, extolling the democratization of photography, promoted the real-photo postcard as a commercially viable product. John A. Tennant, editor of *Photo-Miniature*, wrote in a 1908 issue devoted solely to this medium that it “offers possibilities of profit even to the individual worker with limited facilities, for there is always a market for cards of special or local interest.” Postcards increased the market for photographic

Dr. Rubin, a visual culture specialist and devoted deltiologist, is the co-author with E. Morgan Williams of Larger than Life: The American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905–1915. She is currently writing a book on O. S. Leeland, a turn-of-the-century photographer in Mitchell, South Dakota. Her research interests include Norwegian American photographers, and she would appreciate hearing from anyone with information to share: cynthiaelyce@earthlink.net.



TOP: "Photographs Live Forever," a fitting motto for photographer Mathias O. Bue's Studio and Gift Shop float, Fourth of July parade, Lanesboro, early 1930s. CENTER AND BOTTOM: Mathias Bue's photos of skaters grouped at the base of North Bluff on the Root River, about 1915, and Pele Kvernum's Main Street barbershop, Lanesboro, about 1920.





ABOVE: In 1913 land agent C. D. Baker used Walter Oxley's image of 13-year-old Lloyd Hanson and his prize-winning corn to advertise the quality of the region's "improved farms." RIGHT: Hans Olson, a Lanesboro barber from 1918 into the 1960s and a skilled Norwegian American wood-carver, photographed by Bue.



*Electric Table Lamp
Handcraft by Hans Olson
Lanesboro, Minn.*

services, especially within less populous regions, and so production and marketing them was a logical extension of the small-town photographer's work.³

Producing hundreds of limited-edition postcards, Bue and Oxley created objects of "minutely detailed realism." Ordinary people, places, and events from their personal experiences yield a palpable window to the past in an unprecedented chronicle of everyday Minnesota life. Their work can be examined, as historian Jay Ruby points out, "as socially constructed artifacts which tell us something about the culture depicted, as well as the culture of the picture taker."⁴

WITH ONE FOOT in the nineteenth century and the other in the twentieth, Mathias Bue, a trained photographer, left behind his native Norway in 1907 to follow brother Hans to Minnesota. Able to find employment only as a farmhand, he worked for about two years for a fellow Norwegian, Ole L. Enstad, in Yellow Medicine County and for Enstad's oldest son, Lewis, near Granite Falls. Bue soon established a photography studio in an Enstad farm shed, little more than a wooden shack amidst a group of trees.⁵

The building was indeed primitive but the technology was modern, and demand in the countryside for more casual photographic likenesses was growing. As Sarah Greenough, photography curator at the National Gallery of Art, has explained: "By getting out of the studio into the real world, by removing the psychological barriers between photographer and sitter, and by making the photographer a privileged insider, these images are often endowed with a vivacity and immediacy not previously known in photography." An Enstad family photograph album clearly proves the point, showing groups of family and friends playing croquet, attending an "Ice cream party," and posing by the Swenson brothers' threshing rig. The album also showcases relaxed portraits such as "Sena Henderson cousin of Mathilda Enstad in her Hardangar bunad."⁶

BUE'S PHOTOGRAPHY trade flourished, and although few details of his early professional life are known, he soon owned a studio in Cottonwood. In 1912 he purchased Bersagel Photography in Lanesboro, a thriving town on the Root River. As Bue later told Chicago's influential newspaper *Skandinaven* (The Scandinavian), Lanesboro was the most Norwegian town in Minnesota: "At least those who live there think so. There

are about a thousand inhabitants, about 75% Norwegian, the rest are Irish . . . [who] are speaking Norwegian since Norwegians are a majority."⁷

From the beginning, Bue enjoyed commercial success. The *Lanesboro Leader* in 1912 declared: "In Mr. M. O. Bue, Lanesboro has certainly secured an artist of exceptional merit. That the people of this locality have been quick to appreciate this, is evident from the fact that his photo studio is about the busiest place in town." Bue settled in and married a local woman, Susanna Larson. By 1924 he was able to purchase Langlie Brothers Corner Store Building, and he and his wife moved into its second-floor apartment. On the ground floor, he opened a photography studio and gift shop that sold, according to his letterhead, "photographs, victrolas and kodaks, hand carved photo frames and wall pictures." Later, he added such upscale items as lamps, fine china, and Maxfield Parrish prints. A dumbwaiter connected the studio with the basement developing room where Bue kept film and glass negatives and did his own enlarging. Business included group portraits in circuit format using a Korona Panorama View camera, individual formal portraits, and, according to Lanesboro historian Donald V. Ward, "the photography for all schools within a 50-mile radius."⁸

In addition, Bue captured a wide range of subjects, from public celebrations to the construction of major highways and bridges within Fillmore and Houston counties, interior and exterior views of area businesses, railroad views, Main Streets, churches, and homes. He also took appointments at a branch studio. According to



Mathias and Susanna Bue in their apartment living room above the studio and gift shop, about 1920

a Lanesboro weekly paper, “The neighboring town of Houston has urged him to give them one day each week. Mr. Bue announces that every Tuesday he will be at Houston between the morning way freight and the evening passenger train. Mrs. Bue who is getting to be quite an expert herself, will have charge of the Studio during his absence.”⁹

Because Bue loved to travel everywhere with camera in tow, he outfitted his Model A Coupe with special bumper straps to hold a trunk containing his camera and tripod—ready in an instant for the perfect “photo op.” And when he found something interesting—whether a festive event or local architecture—he took plenty of pictures, sometimes ten shots of the same scene, each with a slightly different angle and often with his car somewhere in the photograph. Ward remembers how Bue “worked hard at getting just the right picture, often retouching the picture before printing it and then double washing the negatives to preserve them.” Always progressive, he owned an “electrical printing machine of the very latest and improved make” that could be “adjusted to any size plate,” a modern time- and labor-saving device. All of this helped Bue to establish what Ward called the “first one-day developing service from Austin to La Crosse.”¹⁰

Returning to Norway in 1921 and 1930, Bue took photographs of the picturesque countryside, which his employee Leone Baker color-tinted by hand back in the Lanesboro studio. Sold to fellow Norwegian Americans, these nostalgic mementoes of the Old Country, ranging in size from 7-by-11 inches to 26-by-40, provided a tangible link to the homeland. So, too, did portraits of recent immigrants, sometimes in native dress, and postcards with captions in the Norwegian language.¹¹

To be sure, it was good business as well as personally fulfilling for Bue to retain his Norwegian cultural ties. The *Lanesboro Leader* announced that he had “cheerfully furnished prints and made enlargements” of pioneer Norwegian settlers and their homes for Fillmore County’s exhibit at Norway’s Centennial Exposition in 1914, “doing the work without money and without price.” Bue also worked diligently to secure Lanesboro’s representation in Minnesota’s Norwegian American activities. According to his local newspaper:

When it comes to doing something for the public good he is liberal almost to a fault. . . . In connection with the great Syttende Mai Centennial Celebration in the Twin Cities . . . there will be an exhibit at one of the Fair Ground buildings of photographs of Norwegians of the

State and to this exhibit he has furnished free of charge almost one hundred photographs of prominent Norwegians of Fillmore County, Norwegians in Minnesota. . . . It is men like Mr. Bue who help to keep Lanesboro on the map.¹²

Recognized as a champion “Buester” by his community, the patriotic photographer served on the City Council and various boards, was a charter member of Lanesboro’s Sons of Norway Lodge, president of Kiwanis, and an active member of the Bethlehem Lutheran Church and professional organizations. Bue retired in 1945 and sold his photo business to Robert Fifield of Fountain, Wisconsin, and George Barry, a New York City photographer, but he continued to operate the gift shop until 1954. The 1953 edition of *Who’s Who in American Portrait Photography* called him “the type of man politicians have in mind when they begin waving the flag and declaiming about the solid citizenry who make up the backbones of our communities.” As Bue himself affirmed, “Of all the pictures and papers I have collected through the years, it is my American citizenship papers, and my war bonds which are my best.”¹³

WALTER THOMAS OXLEY, on the other hand, was born in Britt, Iowa, of English heritage. After attending rural schools and one term at Northern Iowa Normal College, he married Maggie Baughman in 1896 and in 1902 purchased a farm south of Foxhome, in Minnesota’s Wilkin County. He was a good farmer, but, according to family oral history, an accident changed his life’s course. When a setting in Maggie’s ring loosened, he left it at the town general store to await the visit of an itinerant repairman. When Oxley returned to claim the mended ring, the chagrined proprietor informed him that it was lost. In exchange, he offered Oxley a brand-new camera, complete with instructions and processing information. Oxley had acquired his first camera.

Maggie’s reaction to this turn of events was never recorded, but soon, while continuing to farm, Oxley built a portable studio on a hayrack and declared himself open for business. As demand for his services grew, so did his interest in photography. In 1906 he sold the farm and moved to Fergus Falls, where he worked for three years at the Carlson Studio before opening his own business from his home on Cleveland Avenue.

An inventor by nature who admitted, “When I’m up in the deer woods, I’m always thinking to improve things,”



TOP: Postcard advertisement of Bue's Main Street business.

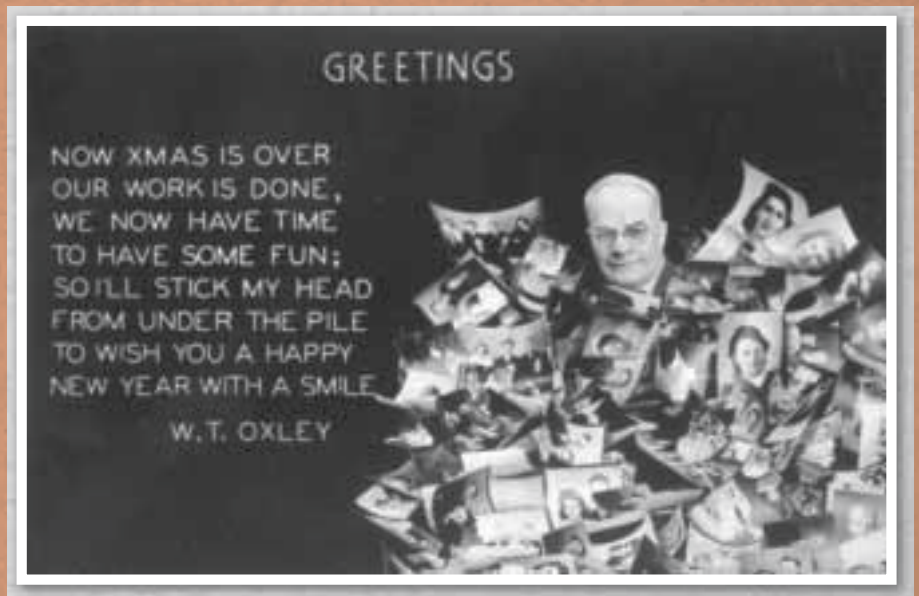
CENTER: Bue's view of the Lanesboro crowd gathered to honor the Norwegian royal couple, 1939.

BOTTOM: Lanesboro's Lutheran church, high school, and Catholic church on Church Hill, which Bue photographed from the railroad cut, about 1910.





TOP: Walter Oxley photo of a women's bowling team, outfitted and sponsored by a local service station. CENTER: New Year's greetings from photographer Oxley. The back of the card reads, in part, "We photograph Anything, Anywhere, Anytime." BOTTOM: An Oxley tall-tale postcard, copyrighted in 1909.



Oxley patented many items, including a grain-sack tie in 1908, a whistling signal for a gasoline pump in 1937, and a photographic printing machine that he sold to Eastman Kodak in 1915. At that time the *Fergus Falls Tribune* reported, "It will be remembered the same company manufactured one of his inventions—a postcard printer—a few years ago, paying him a royalty. Any improvements the Eastman Kodak Co. take up have to have good ideas, as there are inventions from all over the country being shown them every week. This is some little honor to Mr. Oxley."¹⁴

Commercial work was the studio specialty, but Oxley did what many a rural photographer of his era was obliged to do to pay the bills. He kept his panorama camera always at the ready, its tripod extension under a special camera platform mounted on his touring car. His son Lloyd remembers: "Dad would get out of a sick bed real quick if he had a call for work." The photographer was "well liked and respected by this entire community," wrote the *Fergus Falls Tribune*. "He is often engaged to photograph for court cases, and in many instances has been employed on both sides of the same case." His hometown newspaper continued: "Weather conditions, time, place or any other problem that might deter some, never were considered when he had a job to do, he has always been a hustler. Of him it can truly be said that the

customer is not only always right but also the one to be considered and pleased regardless."¹⁵

In an interesting marriage of photography and real estate interests, Oxley's work for land companies influenced potential investors and settlers alike. In 1908 the Columbia Company hired him to join its Oregon excursion; Oxley would photograph the company's property for advertising purposes. According to son Lloyd, he loved to tell the story of how he quickly printed pictures from wet negatives in the men's room as the excursion train traveled to its next destination. When anyone wanted to know what the land was like, Oxley was ready with documentary evidence from the previous stop. Later, in 1916, he photographed Texas acreage for another land company. He also created postcards advertising Otter Tail County's agricultural bounty for the Ulland Land & Loan Company in Fergus Falls.¹⁶

A consummate storyteller and a bit of a jokester, Oxley loved a good yarn. Hunting and fishing, two favorite hobbies, turned into income with his humorous retouched real-photo postcards in the exaggerated or tall-tale genre. In the early 1900s, American wit and ingenuity challenged the old maxim "Photographs don't lie" with a new format for the time-honored tall tale. This phenomenon originated in the Midwest, where farmers were expert in straight-faced boasting about the

Oxley with his Cirkut camera and tripod extension atop his specially equipped touring car



enormity of prize specimens, whether they be produce grown, fish caught, or animals hunted. Imagine the twinkle in Oxley's eye as he developed his images of giant prairie chickens confronting the hunter; five watermelons, "the kind we raise here," tumbling onto the street, too heavy for their cart; and children trying to handle ever so many large fish jumping onto the dock—"Good Fishing Here."¹⁷

Not all of Oxley's postcards were so light-hearted. Recording the destruction after the great cyclone of June 22, 1919, hit Fergus Falls, the *Fergus Falls Daily Journal* reported, "Death List will be between 50 and 75 with 160 injured and Property Loss Enormous." The photographer put his camera to work and produced a series of postcards and seven panoramic views ranging up to 4-foot-by-8-inches. Oxley considered these photographs, published throughout the nation, the most important work of his career. They were hailed as being responsible for raising a large amount of aid for the victims.¹⁸

Later, Oxley started a photo-finishing business and, with the help of sons Elmer and Lloyd and daughter Florence, served seven local drug stores for almost 50 years. In addition, he operated Saturday branch studios during the mid-1920s in Rothsay, Henning, and Evansville. Then, turning performer from 1925 to 1927 with son Elmer, he showed silent home movies taken with a 16-millimeter, hand-cranked Eastman camera to groups in surrounding towns while a friend played background music on the piano. Captured on hundreds of feet of movie film was the construction of Friberg Dam near Hoot Lake in 1924, the drilling for oil near Foxhome in 1926, Charles Lindbergh's visit to Fargo in 1927, and the 1932 Fergus Falls Golden Jubilee, as well as goings on such as Gus Comstock setting the world record for drinking 85 consecutive cups of coffee in three-and-a-half hours at a Fergus Falls restaurant.¹⁹

In 1940 W. T. Oxley and Sons moved from the family home to a space above the Rovang Jewelry Store in downtown Fergus Falls, where Oxley and Lloyd did commercial and portrait work. Elmer and Florence continued the photo finishing at home until the late 1940s, when the popularity of color processing spelled the end of their business. After his father had a stroke in 1953, Lloyd maintained the studio until he retired in 1966. In total, the Oxley name and photography were intertwined in Fergus Falls for more than half a century.²⁰

IT IS CLEAR that Bue and Oxley, entrepreneurial and civic-minded men, responded to the influences around them by answering a voracious demand for quality views.²¹ By depicting the intimate realities of small-town Minnesota life at a time when little formal attention was paid to prosaic subjects, both photographers provided an authentic, firsthand, sweeping visual record. To a cultural historian, their works "extend well beyond the simple documentary record" as their images suggest issues and attitudes "of many less concrete aspects of our past."²²

What can we glean from these photographs? More than mere documents, they prove to be cultural texts.²³ For example, Bue's varied informal photographs of Norwegian American activities yield clues to the attitude of many Lanesboro citizens toward their heritage. His 1939 images of the Norwegian royal couple, Olaf and Martha, participating in a Lanesboro parade show Bue's enduring, deep feeling of connection with his homeland—and an identical feeling in the watchful crowd. Similarly, Oxley's panoramic photographs, including views of fire departments and people participating at events such as "Old Settlers of Ottertail County in 1921," indicate a deep love of region. Civic pride is implicit in the internal dialog of the characters in the image and in the photographer's relationship to them.

Photographic images can affect culture and attitudes in many ways. With the distribution of their real-photo postcards, Bue and Oxley exerted a direct influence on ordinary citizens beyond Lanesboro and Fergus Falls. Postcard recipients, wherever they might live, perceived these Minnesota places not with idyllic or stereotypical images but through views of ordinary people taking pride in doing ordinary things. The cards demonstrate how everyday life takes on meaning and significance.

As creative alchemists, Mathias O. Bue and Walter T. Oxley transformed commonplace photographic images into unique artifacts. They were influenced by the history surrounding them and, in turn, influenced how we perceive and understand history. Their images, a largely ignored historical resource produced by men whose names and contributions are only now being recognized, challenge us to look seriously at photographs and their effects on the culture that surrounds them. Seen today, their images address broad social context as they visually preserve Minnesota's historical and cultural memory so that future generations may see and understand. □

Notes

Research for this article was supported, in part, by a grant from the Minnesota Historical Society with funds provided by the State of Minnesota. I wish to thank the Society's staff, particularly Deborah Miller and Marilyn Ziebarth; Lloyd Oxley and Donald V. Ward for their invaluable assistance; the Norwegian-American Historical Association, in particular Kim Holland and Forrest Brown for Norwegian translation; Tova Brandt of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum; Kathy Evavold of the Otter Tail County Historical Society; Jerry Henke of the Fillmore County Historical Center; and Rachel Vagts at Luther College.

1. There is no accurate count of Minnesota photographers of the early-twentieth century. According to Bonnie Wilson, curator of sound and visual collections at the Minnesota Historical Society, a checklist is being developed.

2. "A Small-Town Photographer," *Abel's Photographic Weekly* 4 (Oct. 2, 1909): 92–93.

3. John A. Tennant, "Photographic Postcards," *Photo-Miniature* 8 (Oct. 1908): 424 (quote). Jody Blake and Jeannette Lasansky, *Rural Delivery: Real Photo Postcards from Central Pennsylvania 1905–1935* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996), 14, cite E. J. Wall and H. Snowden Ward, *The Photographic Picture Post-Card for Personal Use and for Profit*, 1906, as "one of the earliest manuals on the making and marketing of real photo postcards."

4. Jeffrey L. Meikle, "A Paper Atlantis: Postcards, Mass Art, and the American Scene: The Eleventh Reyner Banham Memorial Lecture," *Journal of Design History* 13 (2000): 270 (realism quote); Jay Ruby, "Images of Rural America: View Photographs and Picture Postcards," *History of Photography* 12 (Oct.–Dec. 1988): 327. Ruby discusses the role of the view postcard, or street scene, in which "issues of aesthetics and accuracy are then subsumed by larger questions about communication."

5. Donald V. Ward, conversations with author, 2002; O. L. Enstad to Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, Decorah,

IA, Mar. 12, 1992. According to Ward, Bue said that he apprenticed in Norway for seven years. An Enstad family photo album now in the Vesterheim collection contains three photographs of Bue's earliest studio: "Stony Run Photo Studio, Well Side Ave. 1st N. near Granite Falls, Mn"; "Stony Run Photo Gallery. Prop. The Hireman (09)"; and "Bue & Co. Art Studio Vis-a-Vis Corn, Corn Crib."

6. Sarah Greenough, "The Curious Contagion of the Camera," in *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography*, ed. Greenough et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1989), 132; Enstad photo album.

7. *Skandinaven*, Aug. 25, 1936, copy in Norwegian-American Historical Association, Northfield, MN; translation by Forrest Brown. On Norwegian settlement areas, see Jon Gjerde and Carlton C. Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002).

8. *Lanesboro Leader*, Sept. 14, 1912, clipping, and Bue letterhead, both in collection of Donald V. Ward, Lanesboro; Ward conversations with author.

9. *Levang's Weekly*, Nov. 1, 1917, clipping, Ward collection.

10. *Lanesboro Leader*, June 27, 1914, clipping, Ward collection; Ward conversations.

11. A three-fold brochure, "Norske Billeder;" (ca. 1921) lists 92 Norwegian views; O. M. Norlie Collection, Norwegian-American Historical Assn.

12. *Lanesboro Leader*, Mar. 7, 1914, May 16, 1914, clippings, Ward collection.

13. Bue quote from *Decorah Posten*, Aug. 1, 1946, Norwegian-American Historical Assn.; translation by Forrest Brown. When Donald Ward purchased the former Bue photography business from Fifield and the building that had housed Bue's studio, he discovered in the basement thousands of glass-plate negatives of Bue's work along with his cameras and darkroom equipment.

14. Undated clipping, collection of Lloyd Oxley, Fergus Falls. Searching for documentation of Oxley's invention, the author learned: "Since the printer was built by the Rochester Optical Division of Eastman

Kodak Company I expect that any correspondence [1910–15] would have been carried on with that division, and those letters no longer exist." David A. Gibson, Photo Equipment Museum, Eastman Kodak Company, to Cynthia Rubin, Jan. 23, 1989.

15. *Fergus Falls Tribune*, Nov. 30, 1939, p. 1, 8.

16. The author was not able to locate any Texas land-company photographs. A booster pamphlet, *In a Water Power City* (ca. 1925), in Otter Tail County Historical Society collections, states, "Land is still cheap and good farms can be had at from twenty to forty dollars per acre."

17. On the role of the tall-tale postcard in American culture, see Cynthia Elyce Rubin and E. Morgan Williams, *Larger than Life: The American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905–1915* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1990).

18. Newspaper pictured in Jane Thompson, ed., *Fergus Falls, Minnesota, 1872–1972* (Fergus Falls: City Centennial Publication, 1972), [16]. Panoramic photographs of the devastation are on view at the Arneson Insurance Agency in Fergus Falls. The Otter Tail County Historical Society, Fergus Falls, holds the Oxley archives.

19. W. T. Oxley and Sons advertisement, Lloyd Oxley collection.

20. Lloyd Oxley, conversations with author, 2002.

21. With the demand for black-and-white real-photo postcards decreasing, as customers increasingly preferred colored stock, Oxley adapted. Instead of selling his own retouched photographs, he ordered for resale colored linen-type postcards with a textured finish produced from his original photos by the Curt Teich Company of Chicago. He ordered 13 views of Fergus Falls; Katherine Hamilton-Smith, curator of historical resources, Lake County Discovery Museum, Wauconda, IL, to author, 2002.

22. Martha A. Sandwisch, ed., *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1991), xv.

23. See Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989) for interpretation made from "an attitude toward history."

The photos on p. 111, 112 (bottom), 113, and 115 are from the collection of Donald V. Ward, Lanesboro; those on p. 112 (top), 116, and 117 are from the author's collection.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).