Men’s Photo Club

The urge to gather around shared affinities and avocations is a powerful one, and so is the attendant compulsion to portray the gathering. Open a typical high school or college yearbook to find a lengthy, well-populated section depicting clubs, teams, publications staff, councils, and other collective activities. In the Minnesota Historical Society collections reside group photos recording hiking and harmonica clubs, the “Hook ‘Em Cow Club,” and 4H-ers, of course.

Also, one can find “Meeting of men’s photo club, Hallie Q. Brown Center,” approximately dated 1955. At least two of the men sitting around a table in that photograph reappear in this one; perhaps this “ca. 1960” image represents a later meeting. (The Hallie Q. Brown Center, founded in 1929, is still active in St. Paul in its building on Kent Street, off of Summit Avenue.) Despite the gathering impulse of photography, no cameras are visible in either image.

The work these men are showing the camera may have resulted from an “animals” assignment. It’s safe to assume that each man produced the prints he holds, given the nature of the group. But how much can we safely assume beyond that?

This image is full of oddities, intriguing folds in the fabric of standard expectations. Why is everyone crouched down, squatting or kneeling on the floor? Was this a low-ceilinged room? And why all the glum faces? Only one man is smiling outright—pleased, perhaps, with recognition for his zebras and well-coiffed spaniel.

(Getting a good photograph of an all-black dog is no simple feat.) Two seem bemused, the two men to our right face the camera sternly, and the other two seem entirely distracted from the document being made: one seemingly casting his gaze at a spot on the floor, the other looking more or less at him with one of those looks that kill.

This is a group photograph that should not have survived the editor’s scissors—it doesn’t pass the “watch the birdie,” look-at-the-camera test. All the better for us, though, a half-century later. What would have been a conventional record of an amateur photography club has become a quirky, unintentionally revealing document of male interactions and poses. And a reaffirmation, if one was needed, of the enduring appeal of pets as subjects for the camera. Still, I find myself wondering if there was a person making the photograph at just this moment or if the camera was mounted on a tripod and set to expose with a timer. Either way, fortune and fate conspired to bring us a picture that looks back.

—George Slade

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