THE IMAGE AND ITS MAKER

EARLY FRESNO PHOTOGRAPHERS (1880-1900)

By Sharon Hügel
Plate 3: Mary, William, Agnes and Margaret Porteous. Photographer: J. F. Maxwell.
The photographer's image intensifies and clarifies our perception of the past, and serves to liberate the present from the isolating effects of time. Men with cameras, on pack mules in the mountains, in second-story studios with skylights, or out on the dusty city streets, recorded the life of Fresno's early days. Through their eyes we can understand our collective history.

One of these early photographers was Edgerton R. Higgins (1844-1911). Born in Canada, he came to San Francisco to join his family in 1864. Higgins discovered his talent for taking photographs while working in his brother's photography business. For several years, he operated a successful photograph studio in Sacramento, and also did work for leading San Francisco galleries. By 1882, he had settled in Fresno and opened a studio on Mariposa Street.

Higgins' studio was featured in an 1896 promotional pamphlet on Fresno published by the Chamber of Commerce, and he was the photographer for the 1897 book Imperial Fresno. The images he created for Imperial Fresno form a vivid portrait of every aspect of the turn-of-the-century city and the surrounding agricultural development.

As an active participant in the community, he was the major organizer of Fresno's Volunteer Fire Department in 1887, and served as its chief in the early 1890s. Higgins renamed his business the Rembrandt Studio in 1898, and two years later C. A. Howland joined him in partnership. Together, they continued to produce fine portrait work and scenes of Fresno landmarks.

The colorful figure of Roderick W. Riggs (1859-1940) was active during the logging era of the 1880s and 90s. He traveled the mountain roads with his camera and captured the excitement of the lumber camps. Also known as John Rodd, B.C. (By God), he took hundreds of candid shots of Fresno pioneers and mounted them on large subject cards with titles such as "Our Fresno Girls" or "Pioneer Merchants." On the cards of the Millerton pioneers, Riggs gives credit

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"I have seized the light, I have arrested its flight..."
Louis Daguerre
(upon discovery of his first photographic image, Paris, 1839)
"The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each to himself. And that is the most complicated thing on earth..."

Photographer Edward Steichen
(on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday)


Plate 10: Celebration of Chinese New Year in the general store of Quong-Shun-Wo on Tulare Street near Fagen Alley, ca. 1890. Photographer: Maxwell and Mudge.

Plate 11: Parade scene from Mariposa Street at Courthouse Park, Fresno, ca. 1907. Note the 'Boy with the Leaking Boot' fountain. Photographer: Maxwell and Mudge.


ture their image with a desired lighting effect. He enjoyed growing many kinds of fruits and vegetables, whether on the family farm or in a home garden or flower beds. There are charming family photos taken in the Peters' strawberry fields. He was a student of geology and astronomy, and taught himself to play the violin.

Peters' zest for living is reflected throughout his photographic work. His images are an inexhaustible resource for historians and researchers.

At the turn of the century, there were over ten photographers active in their studios in Fresno. Notable among them were A. W. Foster, and Rifenburg and Dow. There were also two women operating studios: Mrs. L. S. Burt and Miss Olive Langford. Miss Langford advertised in the city directory that she specialized in children's portraits.

The photographers in this essay, each with his unique perspective, left us a rich legacy in their images. They present us, in beautiful and graphic detail, the people and places that comprise Fresno's heritage. Their photographs are a priceless gift to the future.

The photographs in this article are from the collections of the FCCHS Archives.

SOURCES CONSULTED:
Biography File. FCCHS Archives.
Fresno City Directories, 1888-1905. Fresno County Library.
Imperial Fresno. Fresno: Fresno Republican Publishing Company, 1897.
Photograph Collections. FCCHS Archives.
Walker, Ben R. Newspaper Clipping File. FCCHS Archives.
The quotation on page 5 was taken from Collection, Use and Care of Historical Photographs Robert A. Weinstein and Larry Booth. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977.

to E. R. Higgins as the photographer. He was also active in Fresno, photographing the growth of a bustling town. In his later years, Riggs was an avid collector of postcard photos of Fresno history.

Photographer H. H. Alexander is listed in the Fresno city directories for only three years—1896, 1898 and 1900. Although there is little biographical information on him, Alexander speaks to us vividly through his camera. His carefully composed photographs create a deliberate impression of a refined, gentle world. Oil wells silhouetted against rolling hills, Fresno views, group portraits, mountain scenes, and still lifes of valley produce are examples of his diverse subject matter. Each of Alexander's images makes a clear statement of his sense of life's beauty and order.

John Franklin Maxwell (1867-1955) was a man of many talents. His first experience in Fresno was as a reporter for the Fresno Expositor in the early 1890s. He returned to Indiana when the Expositor ceased publication and studied photography. Maxwell came West again and set up his second-story studio here in 1896. Four years later he became a partner with A. C. Mudge. Maxwell worked as the "inside man" creating beautiful studio portraits with subtle shading from a skylight. The "outside man," Mudge took photographs of Fresno events, street scenes, and group portraits on location. Two of Fresno's photographers, H. H. Alexander and A. W. Peters, used the Maxwell darkroom for a brief period, in exchange for which they gave negatives of their prints to Maxwell and Mudge.

Perhaps a frustrated actor, Maxwell enjoyed play-acting in front of the camera, and could quote Shakespeare by the hour. His business passed to two of his sons in 1946. Although retired, he remained active at the studio, and took photographs through his later years.

Although not a professional photographer, Archibald W. Peters (1866-1959), produced innumerable photos throughout his lifetime. Eight hundred of those images are extant, and they detail the fascinating diversity of Fresno's life.

At the urging of his relatives, Peters came west to Fresno in 1887. A self-taught photographer, he was hired by John Eastwood to document the construction of the San Joaquin Electric Company's Sierra mountains power-house complex in 1895-96. During this time he did important work detailing the lifestyle of Western Mono Indians. Because of his interest and friendly manner, Peters became close to many of the Indians.

His love for the mountains led to frequent family trips, and a large subject collection of sweeping Sierra views resulted. The seven Peters' children were exposed to their father's love of nature throughout their home life. He once drove the family hundreds of miles to view a total eclipse so they could see chickens go roost in mid-morning.

Peters was a meticulous photographer, and occasionally would awaken his children at dawn to cap-
Negatives of 1896 Hydroelectric Plant Construction Preserved

By Donald C. Jackson

Editor's Note:
This article was published in the Society for Industrial Archaeology Newsletter (Volume 9, Nos. 5 & 6, September - November, 1980) and reprinted with the Society's permission. The author, Donald C. Jackson, is a Staff Engineer for the Historic American Engineering Record (a section of the U.S. Interior Department's Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service). In pursuing his research on engineer John S. Eastwood, Mr. Jackson visited the Fresno City and County Historical Society Archives in 1979 to study the A. W. Peters' Glass Negative Collection.

Thanks to the efforts of the Fresno City and County Historical Society, over two hundred 5" x 7" glass plate negatives documenting the construction of the San Joaquin Electric Company's 1896 power plant near Fresno, California, are being maintained and catalogued. Taken by A. W. Peters, a prominent local photographer, the photographs provide detailed visual information about America's premier 19th century high-head hydroelectric plant.

As described in the April 1896 Journal of Electricity, the plant operated under a head of 1,410 feet (by far the highest in the world at the time), and water was delivered to the high-speed Pelton turbines through a steel penstock over 4,000 feet long. Water was diverted from the North Fork of the San Joaquin River to the top of the penstock by seven miles of ditches and flumes. The turbines powered three 340 kW, 3-phase, 60-cycle General Electric generators that delivered current to the transformers at 700 volts. The GE air-cooled transformers stepped this up to 11,000 volts for transmission to the SJEC's Fresno substation over 34 miles away. At the time of the plant's initial operation in the spring of 1896, it transmitted 3-phase electricity for commercial purposes farther than any other hydroelectric plant in the world.

Designed by John S. Eastwood, the plant operated successfully for three years, until the great California drought of the late 1890s dried up the North Fork and brought its turbines to a standstill. The company was forced into bankruptcy, and the plant was sold to the San Joaquin Light & Power Company (SJL&P later was absorbed into Pacific Gas & Electric.)

Today, the original powerhouse survives, minus equipment, as an office/storage building next to the A. G. Wishon Power Plant on the shores of Lake Kerchoff.

Peters' photographs record practically all aspects of the plant's construction. He carried his camera everywhere, from the beginning of the ditch/flume system, to the holding reservoir and penstock intake, to the powerhouse, to the 34 mile transmission line. The photographs include many views of workers, providing a fascinating glimpse of this aspect of late 19th century California culture. The significance of the SJEC plant, and early California hydroelectric development in general, has largely gone unrecognized in electrical history. But, as material like these photographs comes to light, a more accurate picture of the 19th century hydroelectric power industry can be drawn.
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