

Manuscript Collections

The Rickels Photograph Collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa

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GERDJANSSEN RICKELS (1874–1948), a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor in Iowa during the first half of the twentieth century, was born in a log cabin in the Maquoketa River hills near Scotch Grove, Iowa. He was the first of ten children born to Gerd and Gesche Rickels, who had recently emigrated from Ostfriesland, Germany. He grew up in the Maquoketa timber and retained a deep love, evidenced in his later photographs, for this part of Iowa.

Rickels attended timber schools near Scotch Grove, and after his confirmation at St. John's "Sandhill" Lutheran Church near Monticello, his pastor encouraged him to prepare for the ministry. His six years of preseminary training were spent at Concordia College, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Following his graduation in 1896, Rickels completed his formal preparation for the ministry at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, in 1899.

It was at Concordia Seminary, to judge from his diaries, that he turned to an interest in photography. On December 9, 1897, the seminary student bought his first camera—a "dexter [*sic*] 3½ × 3½ for \$3.00." For Christmas that year, he had received a letter from home with six dollars and used part of the money to buy "some photo mounts and a graduate [graduated beaker]." From then on his diary frequently refers to his study of composition and other artistic principles. Unable to afford the books from which he read, he copied long sections of instructions and chemical formulas into his notebook.

Rickels's diaries of 1897 and 1898 contain evidence of much interest in photography among the students at Concordia Seminary. At times the interest amounted to almost a fad.



Gesche Rickels and Robert in the parsonage kitchen, 1925.

Between January 1897 and the end of June 1898, the diaries mention at least ninety-seven references to some form of photographic activity: going with a group of students or alone to photograph friends, professors, soldiers at Jefferson Barracks, picnic groups, churches, and parks around St. Louis; developing, printing, and toning photographs (one can only imagine what primitive equipment he could afford and what sort of facilities could have been available in the dormitories), and—for the only time in his life—selling photographs, to the professors and to the soldiers in the barracks. During the Christmas vacation of 1897–98, on January 7, he wrote of going with seven of his fellow seminarians to “just raise cain taking pictures. . . . Come back & I develop mine before supper. After supper make envelopes for negatives.” The next day, January 8, “I print pictures all day. P.M. tone & trim. Take a picture of a vacation nature. After supper develop then go to 3818 [the home of friends]. Sit and talk for an hour & ½ discussing pictures etc. Then go home & mount 25 pictures.”

During his lifetime, Rickels served pastorates at Farnhamville, Rockwell City, and Atkins, Iowa. The greater part of this service, from 1920 to 1948, was at St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church at Atkins. In addition, Rickels also served in various

capacities in the Iowa District East of the Missouri Synod Lutheran church. Very soon after graduating from the seminary, the young pastor married Carolina Halstenberg whom he had met in St. Louis. Her early death left him a widower with a small daughter, Ruth. In 1917 Rickels married Augusta Schnell of Pomeroy, Iowa. Two children, Lenore and Robert, were born to this marriage.

Rickels's passionate interest in photography never waned, but a world of difference lay between the first "dexter $3\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ " and the last camera which he possessed, a beautiful Busch Press camera, which he acquired during the last year of his life and which he never used. Sadly his family saw him open the camera case from time to time, fondle and dust the camera, then put it away "until I feel more like taking pictures." The years between saw a variety of cameras tried and traded: models of Kodaks, Zeiss Ikon's, an Ikomat, a Graflex, and a Rolleiflex (soon traded, inexplicably, for a Rolleicord). Rickels never possessed a 35-millimeter camera; his disdain for color photography probably was as much the result of its cost as what he considered its inadequacies as an artistic medium.

The photographic equipment, other than cameras, was not elaborate. Rickels may have had an extra lens for close-up work, a filter or two, but "accessories" were not within his price range. A very sturdy wooden expandable tripod accompanied him through the years, and a familiar view to his family was the five-legged creature—tripod and photographer—hidden within the black carapace of his focusing cloth.

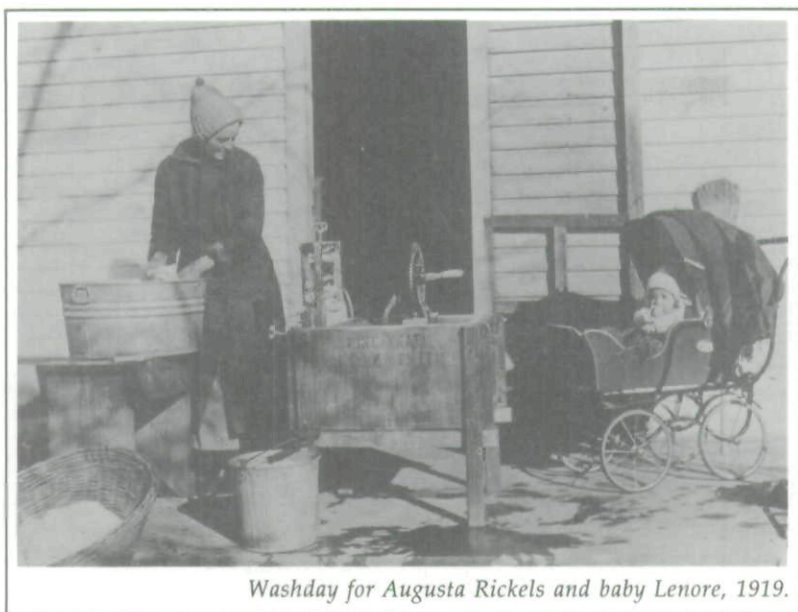
If the photographic equipment was sparse, the laboratory which he finally acquired in the 1920s was primitive. The partitions for the darkroom had been built by Rickels with a colleague, the parochial school teacher. Inside the dark room they had installed an old wooden sink, somewhat on the order of a dry sink except that instead of a bowl and pitcher, a real basin held the water which came from the type of porcelain water jar often installed in country schools of that era. A drain some distance away must have taken care of flushing the water either through a hose leading from the darkroom or tin pails carried therefrom. Two makeshift tables outside the darkroom held the homemade enlarger, the photographic trays, cutting board, and fruit-crate shelves for blotting paper. The photographic paper it-



A traveling salesman arrives, Jones County, Iowa, c. 1920.

self and chemicals (except for the "hypo" which was freshly mixed) were stored in the drier atmosphere of the second-floor hallway. After any photographic outing, the smell of the drying film permeated the Rickels home and filmstrips filled the cold-weather clothes line in the basement.

These simple biographical facts give little evidence of what might be expected in the Rickels Photograph Collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City. The Historical Society's collection is a representative sample of Rickels's lifetime work, containing 143 images selected for their historical value. Those interested in the social history of rural Iowa, particularly those interested in parsonage and parish life during the 1920s through the 1940s, will find photographs portraying principally the quotidian activities of a country preacher and his family. While Rickels processed his photographs himself, he steadfastly refused to do any photographic work commercially. Photography as a hobby was a safety valve for Rickels in a preaching career which lasted from circuit-rider on horseback through the kind of Chevy-travel affordable to country preachers. Although often urged to exhibit and to sell his photographs, Rickels maintained that his profession was the ministry; photography could be only his avocation.



A brief review of the collection emphasizes the particular interests of the photographer. About three-quarters of the photographs show the household activities of three generations: paternal grandmother, pastor and wife, their children and friends. Since Rickels was fond of portraiture, the members of his long-suffering family frequently appear in their "Sunday best" clothes, which in almost every instance had been sewn by the pastor's wife. Thus the country fashions from 1917 through the 1930s can be observed in these photographs. The home setting appears frequently and reveals the interior and exterior ambience of country parsonage life.

Some scenes of parish life—the church and the school—also appear with winter scenes illustrating the difficulties of the season, notably the hard winter of 1936. For those interested in home architecture during the 1920s, approximately six enlarged original photographs document farm homes constructed during this decade.

Perhaps a fifth of the collection concentrates on scenes of Jones County, Iowa, in the vicinity of Scotch Grove near the Maquoketa River. This area where Rickels grew up and to which he frequently returned for solace, remained throughout his lifetime a setting for some of his best photographs. Scenes of the

Maquoketa hills and in particular of the sand ditches and bluffs along the Jordan Creek, demonstrate the photographer's understanding of landscape photography and illustrate some of the perhaps lesser known, but exceptionally beautiful, views of eastern Iowa.

For Gerdjanssen Rickels, the country boy whose work remained always within his native state and always within the rural parishes which were familiar to him from his own youth, the practice of photography was first of all an artistic expression. It was his way of developing a love for beauty which he could not afford to express in other ways. Although it would be pleasant to record that this photographic collection illustrates momentous events in American history, such is not the case; however, for the social and also the economic historian, these 143 photographs can provide a detailed and authentic source of reference.



Gerdjanssen Rickels in his beloved Maquoketa timber, 1932.

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