

THE PALIMPSEST

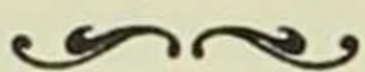
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Quiet, Please

Excitement swept the Chamber of Deputies when, in 1839, announcement was made that Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, painter and physicist, would exhibit to the Deputies and the citizens of Paris a new photographic process upon which he had labored for years. The daguerreotype, said scientific gossip, would make obsolete the popular cameras lucida and obscura which, in reality, were not cameras at all, but only devices to assist draftsmen and artists to gain proper perspective. This new process, for which Daguerre was to receive the Legion of Honor, actually transferred and fixed a subject upon a copper plate.

Little wonder then that Deputies, artists, and scientists exclaimed when they examined in the little room off the Chamber the first results of the daguerrean process. They pointed excitedly to three views of Paris, they commented upon the minute detail shown in a picture of Daguerre's

atelier, and they looked in amazement at photographs of busts in the Louvre. They spoke of the "most incredible accuracy" which never before had been obtained by any painting or drawing technique. The Academy of Sciences formally approved the invention on August 2nd and almost immediately the French government published details, so that it soon became known throughout the world.

In November, 1839, the most distinguished scientific periodical in the United States, the *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, printed Daguerre's own detailed and practical description of the daguerreotype, "which consists in the spontaneous reproduction of the images of natural objects, in the Camera Obscura; not with their colours, but with great delicacy in the gradation of the tints." Within a decade, Americans with homemade equipment had established photographic salons in every large eastern city and were pushing westward to catch and make permanent the narrative of a restless nation on the march. They set up their unwieldy apparatus in the States of the Old Northwest; they crossed the Mississippi into Iowa; and they gambled with Lady Luck on the route to California and Oregon. Fiercely individualistic, these itinerant artists warred with one another in the best traditions of the frontier. In

the river towns of Iowa they were as canny as a New England peddler and twice as slick. Exploiting the novelty of photography, the fond devotion of newlyweds, the pride of parents in their children, and the curiosity of nearly everybody, the pioneer daguerreotypists did a flourishing business.

How many of these photographic merchants set up shop in the Hawkeye State is difficult to determine, for they drifted across the social scene as elusively as the fireflies flitted through the river bottoms. They came into a town, remained for a week or month — even longer if trade was good — and then moved on. Their advertisements would appear in local papers and then suddenly cease. In the autumn of 1848, for example, a daguerrean artist twice visited Burlington and apparently remained about a week each time. This Mr. Fanshaw opened a studio at the Barrett House where the *Hawk-Eye* said he produced excellent miniatures. Two years later P. Lounsberry advertised that he was producing daguerreotypes in a "life-like manner" in his parlor at the corner of Washington and Third streets. Lounsberry probably arrived in Burlington late in the fall of 1850 and remained until the spring or summer of 1851.

At that time C. N. West who had traveled

through the western States and had operated a studio in St. Louis for several years moved into Lounsberry's rooms. He built a new skylight — "one of the finest in the western country" — installed the most modern improvements in the art, including Galvanic apparatus, and announced that visitors might view, free of charge, a picture of Jenny Lind. West also said that he would remain but a limited time and urged everyone to call early. To attract customers, he gave a free public lecture on the history of the daguerrean art at the hall of the Sons of Temperance. But, despite the lure of Jenny Lind and his lecture, West was able to remain in Burlington only about two weeks.

Early in 1852 Lounsberry was back again to remain "for the present to give those bound for California and Oregon an opportunity to leave their shadows with the friends they leave behind them." The next year William Fields opened a gallery on Third Street over Swan's store and announced that no customer might take a picture home unless satisfied that it was both a perfect likeness and a work of art. To call the roll of all the traveling artists who tarried in Burlington and Iowa would be a dull exercise. They came and went with their cases of apparatus, their samples of frames, their cheap lockets, and their expensive breast pins. They coaxed mothers to bring wide-

eyed children to studios in Keokuk, Fairfield, Iowa City, and Davenport. They posed brides and grooms and they photographed corpses. Then, after a day's work was done, they tinkered with their cameras and experimented with Daguerre's process.

It was, indeed, no easy task to make daguerreotypes during the forties and fifties. The process was a complicated one divided into five meticulous operations: the polishing of a silver plate; coating the plate with iodide of silver by submitting it for about twenty minutes to the action of iodine vapor; projection of the image of the object upon the golden colored iodized surface; development of the latent image by means of the vapor of mercury; and, finally, the fixing of the picture by immersing the plate in a solution of what was then called sodium hyposulphite. Of course, refinements were made upon Daguerre's original method, but even so the making of a suitable miniature demanded hard work from the artist and much patience from his subject.

Alexander J. Wolcott, of New York City, reduced the size of the daguerrean camera, but it still measured about fifteen inches long, eight and a half inches high, and eight inches wide. The reflector measured seven inches of clear diameter and had a twelve-inch focus. Still later, after im-

provements made by Charles G. Page, Iowans might have their daguerreotypes done in color, although the artist was never able to determine in advance the exact shade which would result. No early refinements, however, were designed to lessen the time that an Iowa farmer or politician had to sit before exposure was completed. The slightest movement ruined both plate and artist's temper. The time necessary for perfect exposure ranged from seven to perhaps twenty minutes depending upon the light's intensity and the equipment being used. Metal rods with head clamps which locked at the back of the neck helped hold a sitter still.

Fields, in Burlington, kept a wide variety of head locks which he guaranteed could not be seen when "your likeness is neatly set in ring, pin, or locket." And O. L. Burdick told his Davenport customers that clear days were best for children as they would not have to sit so long, but he added that adults were taken equally well in any weather. A special skylight was built into Moses Shamp's studio in Fairfield in order to increase light and thus decrease the time necessary for the subject to remain motionless.

Again and again artists working in Iowa called attention in prose and verse to the fact that daguerreotypes were unexcelled because they were

taken by the sun itself. A. L. Swallow regularly ran the following lines in the Burlington *Daily Telegraph*:

Daguerreotypes must be perfection,
Since pictured by the sun's direction;
Heaven's own bright rays — shed from above
To enshrine the forms of those we love.

When L. W. Buell returned to Keokuk in March, 1853, from a trip to New York where he purchased a "large assortment of Paper Mache, Kossuth, Union, Jewel, Pearl, and other fancy cases," he installed a large skylight to do his work in a "style that will suit all."

This claim immediately incensed Buell's competitor, J. H. Emerson, who inaugurated an advertising campaign calculated to belittle his rival and prove his own superiority. For weeks the feud raged between Emerson's Great Western Gallery and Buell's studio. The battle centered about the respective merits of Buell's skylight and Emerson's side-light. The former, of course, was direct illumination in the best daguerrean tradition, while the latter was indirect lighting which was becoming increasingly popular throughout the nation.

Emerson fired the first heavy salvo in this war of the Keokuk daguerreans in the local paper, *The Morning Glory*. As a poet Emerson probably

was a superior photographer, but the verses are intriguing, not for their literary characteristics, but for the insight they throw upon the social scene, and because they are typical of many others which appeared in the press of the State.

Ladies and gents, my verse indite,
 And brush your flowing curls,
 With face so sweet and dress so neat,
 Into my corner peep.

Give me a call, and I will please
 You all, at No. 3 (Third Street)
 For it's the place to get your face
 Set in a fine gold case.

There you will find a side-light, too;
 The best that's in the city,
 If you don't believe it, come and try
 Our side-light by sitting.

I want you all to bear in mind,
 I'm just as low in price
 As my friend——on——St.,
 But get them up more nice.

Buell promptly announced that he was reducing his prices for the next ninety days to a flat dollar and a half and added crisply: "Also we would say to our friend of the Great Western Daguerrean Gallery that we do not exhibit other Artists' pictures and call them better than our neighbors. We only ask to have a fair trial and see if trans-

mitted is not better than reflected light." Emerson immediately cut his price for the next hundred days, thus charging the same fee as Buell but for ten days longer. He also pointed out the deficiencies of daguerreotyping with skylights. "If you do not wish to be humbugged with a skylight picture," he wrote, "call at No. 3 Third Street, where you can get one taken by a side-light. Shaded just to please the fancy, with a much richer tone than a skylight can produce. There is always a dark, heavy shade below the eyebrows, nose and chin, which cannot be avoided in a skylight picture, but with a side-light, the shades are blended in with the light parts, so as not to show where they join, showing a life-like appearance, which cannot be produced with a skylight."

Buell resented these criticisms and replied: "If you wish a finely-shaded, deep-toned, life-like and natural Miniature, which will not fade, call at Buell's Skylight Daguerrean Gallery, where you can secure a correct likeness, instead of one on which one side of the face is Black, and the other white, or giving no expression at all — which is the case with side-light pictures."

By this time Keokuk citizens must have been fascinated and amused by the photographic conflict in their midst. They watched the controversy to its conclusion. Through the months of 1853,

1854, and 1855 Buell and Emerson kept hammering at one another. By June of the latter year, however, Emerson seemed forced to acknowledge defeat. His advertisements in *The Morning Glory* became fewer and then ceased. Buell, on the other hand, was announcing that he was doing work for residents of Iowa, Missouri, and Illinois; that he was carrying a large stock of daguerrean supplies for artists; and that he was furnishing to the trade the improved apparatus of Harrison, Palmer, and Chapman.

In Iowa City, two daguerrean artists were producing the "most terrific facsimiles of the human visage." On February 1, 1854, Thomas Blanchard, Jr., announced that his rooms in Hemsworth's new building and over Krouse's clothing store were fully equipped and that he was ready to take likenesses varying from the sixteenth size to half-case size. In October, James Hartsock, "Professor of the Daguerrean Art," advertised that he was prepared to furnish miniatures of every size and urged residents to "secure the shadow ere the substance fade." Prices ranged from the cheaper pictures at about a dollar and a half to the more expensive miniatures set in elaborate cases which were sold for as high as twenty dollars. Miniatures of the sick or deceased usually were more costly, not only because of the urgency of the

situation, but also because the artist had to carry his cumbersome equipment from studio to home.

By the time of the Civil War the daguerrean artist no longer was enjoying the popularity and prosperity of earlier years. Improvement in method and new inventions gradually were transforming the old artist who followed Daguerre into a professional photographer with simplified plate and camera. The dry plate and the alkaline developer were in use in the early years of the 1870's and the rapid gelatin emulsion process became known during the next decade. The boon was great. In 1840, for example, an Iowan sat for as many as twenty minutes for a daguerreotype. Forty years later he was exposed in one-fifteenth of a second.

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