

A Farmer-Photographer's Harvest of Rural Images

by Becki Peterson



Farmer-photographer John Garbison stepped from behind his camera to join this group, but slightly miscalculated his positioning. He appears in the foreground at the far right. He photographed this Sunday gathering on July 3, 1910, at the J. W. Bowles farm, a mile or so from his farm (and 5½ miles east of Milo). Garbison's photographs are historically significant because they depict rural, everyday life through the perspective of a farmer.

THE 1915 census for Iowa tells us that a man named John Garbison, age 45, earned his living as a farmer on a piece of land near Lacona, Iowa, in Warren County. With him were wife Maud, 38, and children Murrel, 17, Rhea, 12, and Jacob (or "Jake"), 4. The Garbisons' farm, which was assessed at a value of \$4,800, included a livestock inventory of 2 milking cows, 4 horses, 52 sheep, 25 swine, 3 goats, and 150 fowl.

It's a sketchy picture at best that can be conjured from this census information. The family's way of life — their work routines, leisure activities, traditions — is hidden somewhere behind the statistics. However, within this particular household, a more revealing record was being created at the turn of the century — this one by farmer John Garbison himself, who found time amidst the demands of farm and family to document everyday experiences through photography. Now, through a combination of good fortune and generosity, these recently recovered images by John Garbison are available to help us flesh out the picture of a rural Iowa family that lived some eighty years ago. But without a fortuitous series of events, the photographs would not be accessible to Iowans today.

As it happened, a set of eighty-nine glass plate negatives created by Garbison, roughly between 1895 and 1915, was passed down to his daughter, Rhea, who settled with her husband in Silva, Missouri. The negatives were later purchased from her estate by a local antique dealer.

Sometime later, in 1989, James Wallace and his mother, of Osceola, Arkansas, were visiting relatives in Piedmont, Missouri. They stopped at an antique shop, and in the course of their visit, a set of glass plate negatives was retrieved from a barn next to the store. Being history enthusiasts themselves (both were members of their county historical society back home in Arkansas), the Wallaces were impressed enough by the quality and content of the glass plates to purchase them. Further investigation brought the Wallaces in contact with Garbison relatives residing near Silva and Piedmont, Missouri. They verified that the photographer was indeed their great-grandfather, John Garbison of Warren County, Iowa.

James Wallace and his mother recognized that the glass plates, being mostly images of the rural Iowa community where Garbison lived, would be of special significance to Iowans. They contacted the State Historical Society of Iowa and offered to donate the collection. Rare in its scope, continuity, physical condition, and wealth of documentation, the glass plate collection was enthusiastically accepted into the archives of the State Historical Society's Des Moines facility.

As remarkable as the collection's survival and serendipitous return to Iowa, is the photography itself. What Garbison recorded — in his images and in the technical steps of producing those images — tells us much about both rural life and photography in turn-of-the-century Iowa. Although the Society holds over fifty collections of glass plate negatives, only a half-dozen represent the work of farmer-photographers. Garbison's work is historically important because it presents the rare perspective of a farmer documenting his livelihood and community through photography.

JOHAN Garbison took up photography at a time when new technology had opened the craft to scores of amateurs. Previously, the complicated wet-plate process had required a photographer to have both technical expertise and immediate access to a darkroom. In the brief time before the chemicals dried (usually five to fifteen minutes), the photographer had to coat the plate, shoot the image, and develop the negative. The dry-plate (or gelatin) negative, which became available for purchase in the 1880s, was much easier to process because the plates were pre-coated by the manufacturer. The photographer needed only to insert a glass plate into the camera and shoot the image. Since the plate could be processed at any time after the photo was taken, an amateur without a darkroom could take the glass plate negatives to a local drugstore or commercial photographer for processing.

For Garbison though, involvement with photography did not stop after the shutter closed. Working in his own darkroom, he printed from his own plates using a process that

is seldom used today; no enlargers or pans of developing solutions were needed. First, he would place the glass plate negative directly onto a sheet of chemically pretreated printing-out paper. (He used a brand named "Darko.") Next, he would expose the negative to lamplight or sunlight and wait as an image slowly appeared on the paper. The finished "contact print" was the same size as the negative. Garbison then stored each negative in a paper sleeve.

As a hobbyist with a desire to learn from his experience and improve his skill, John Garbison carefully recorded notes relating to his darkroom work on the paper sleeves. In addition to exposure times, which he measured in

"counts," he also noted any special makeshift darkroom techniques used to compensate for overexposed negatives or other problems. For example, the note on one sleeve reads: "90 counts and shade people & cattle with teaspoon handle from 50 on." This tells us that Garbison exposed the entire negative for ninety counts. But during the last forty counts, he used a spoon to block the light over portions of the image that otherwise would have been obscured on the print.

Photography was not an exact science at this time; amateurs could only estimate proper camera settings based on judgment of weather conditions and available light. Some of Garbison's storage sleeve notations describe the dif-



A display of camaraderie from Rhea Garbison (left) and Ruth Burham, the apparent guardians of the flock behind them. (July 1, 1914). John Garbison's glass plate negatives were later passed to his daughter, Rhea Garbison Luke, who settled in Missouri. An antique dealer purchased them at Rhea's estate sale, and in turn sold them to Jim Wallace of Osceola, Arkansas, who donated them to the State Historical Society of Iowa.

difficulties or unusual situations he encountered — for instance, “flies so bad one horse moved its head,” or “Perl’s hair blurring by blowing in front of eyes,” or “15 sec. after sundown.” For a posed family group he noted, “5:30 P.M. Cloudy & cold. 10 sec . . . babie moved slightly, all the rest good.” The uncontrollable variables of outdoor photography, the slower shutter speeds of early cameras, and the longer time required to capture an image on a glass plate challenged amateur and professional photographers alike during this period. Yet it is rare to find a photographer’s direct references to these obstacles. Photography was a time-consuming and relatively expensive hobby. Garbison may well have recorded this information to avoid wasting costly supplies through repetition of earlier mistakes and to remind himself of previous pitfalls.

Garbison also identified his subjects in detail on the negative sleeves. Names of persons, locations of farms, occasions, dates, and in some instances, even the time of day were documented. In an unusual convention, a few of the photos are identified “internally”: he occasionally posed his subject next to a large placard with a handwritten caption on it.

EQUALLY revealing as John Garbison’s documentation, is his choice of subject matter. While he often took “Sunday best” photos (posed groups of relatives and friends, typical in family albums of the period), many of his images offer more candid views. Family members and neighbors are depicted at their labors (harvesting ice, operating a home sawmill, or laying drainage tile in the fields) as well as at their leisure (enjoying a dish of ice cream, hunting rabbits, or taking a dip in the farm pond). In general, historical photographs of everyday life in rural Iowa are scarce. Because Garbison was a farmer, his images offer an insider’s perspective of activities seldom seen. Many of his compositions are marked by an honesty and directness that convey a simple dignity to the subject matter.

One of the most stirring and unusual images shows an elderly man, identified as “Grandpa Ramzey,” bedridden with cancer. While many

photographers would have shunned such sobering subject matter, Garbison chose to treat his subject with the same intimacy and frankness he used in photographing his newborn son Jake. He also apparently understood that photography was a way of creating a historical record or keepsake of once-in-a-lifetime events.

While most of the images were photographed on and around Garbison’s 81-acre farm and the small, Warren County communities of Milo, Liberty Center, and Lakota, a series of steamboat images and flood scenes was taken in Hannibal, Missouri. The photographer’s daughter-in-law, Bessie (“Peggy”) Garbison of Indianola, recalls that Hannibal held a special fascination for the photographer and was a favorite place to visit on family trips.

In a recent interview, Bessie Garbison recalled her father-in-law as a proud man. She was quick to clarify, though, that she did not mean proud “in a bad way.” Rather, John Garbison was a man who greatly valued his family, friends, and farm and did not hesitate to project this to others. Perhaps this pride is what ultimately inspired the farmer-photographer to create an extraordinary collection of rural Iowa images.



From left: John, Rhea, Murrel, and Maud Garbison at their home. (Dated September 19, 1909). A closer look at John Garbison’s world, as seen through his camera, begins on the next page.

This unusual composition, with a small group in the background, was obviously intended to feature Elva McNeer, possibly in recognition of the child's birthday. The photograph was taken on her family's farm 3¼ miles east of Milo, Iowa, on January 23, 1910. No one is wearing a coat — perhaps because it's a special occasion or an unseasonably mild day in January.

Preserving the Garbison Collection for Public Use

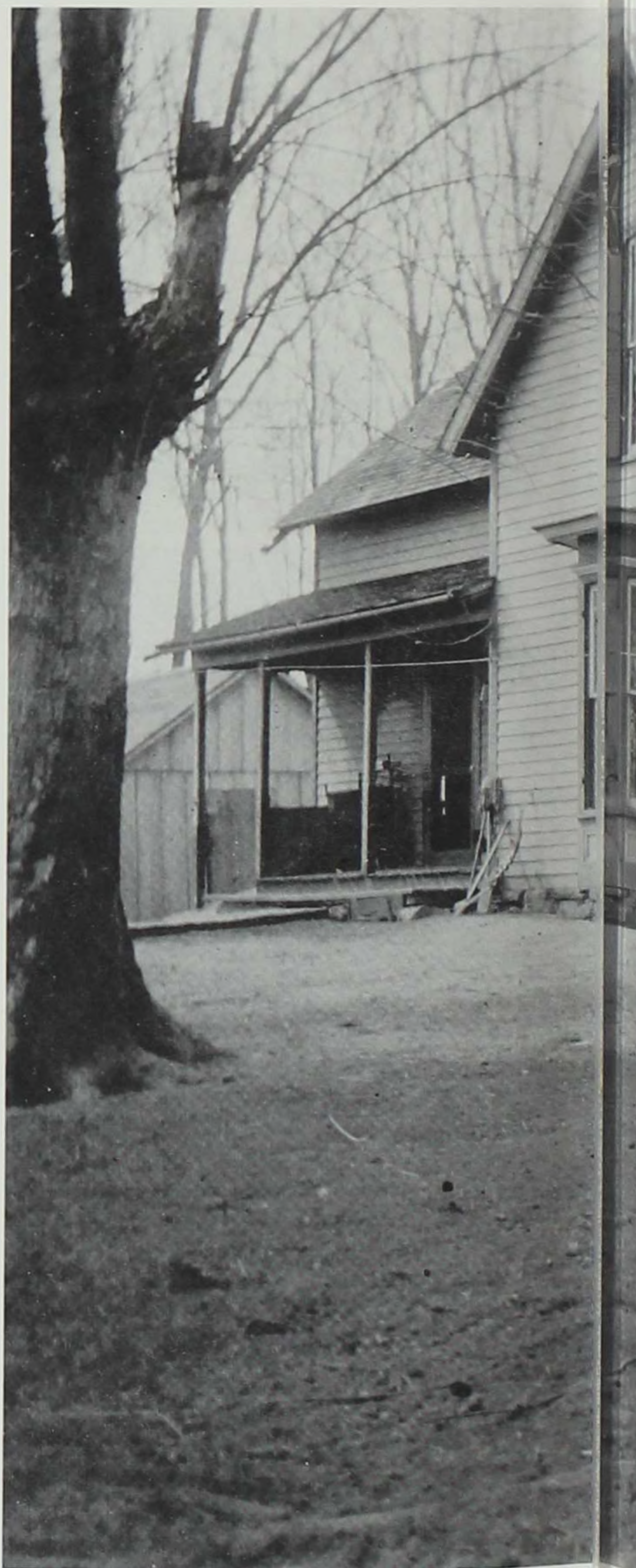
AFTER the glass plate negatives were added to the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa in its Des Moines location, photo archivist Becki Peterson took several steps to help stabilize and preserve them.

Glass plate negatives are covered with a thin layer of film emulsion, just as plastic-based film is today. The image can be easily destroyed if the emulsion layer starts to flake or lift from the edges. The original paper sleeves that John Garbison used to protect his glass plate negatives were made of highly acidic paper. This rapidly decomposing paper can actually stain the image or accelerate the deterioration of the emulsion layer. Therefore, the photo archivist removed the plates to archival paper sleeves and stored them in non-acidic boxes with rigid supports.

The original paper sleeves are being kept for both their informational and artifactual value, but eventually the acidic paper will become too brittle to handle. Therefore, to preserve Garbison's notes, the sleeves have been photocopied onto acid-free paper.

To make the images accessible to the public, a set of prints has been made for viewing. The fragile glass plates are only 1/16" inch thick and therefore should be handled minimally. Eventually, the Society will have copy negatives made on plastic-based film, so that reproductions can be ordered without handling the original glass plate negatives.

The Garbison Collection comprises nearly a hundred images and is housed in the archives section of the State Historical Society of Iowa. To request to see the photographic prints, visit the Library/Archives reading room at the State Historical Building, 600 East Locust, in Des Moines, Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Requests for a Saturday viewing must be made in advance (515-281-6200).







Paul Smith and Murrel Garbison (right) mug with guns near Murrel's home. (Dated August 11, 1914)



Visiting teacher Hazel Stanger poses with the Garbison family in a snowy field. Murrel and Rhea Garbison (center) attended the McNair (or McNeer) School in Belmont Township, Warren County. (Circa 1910)

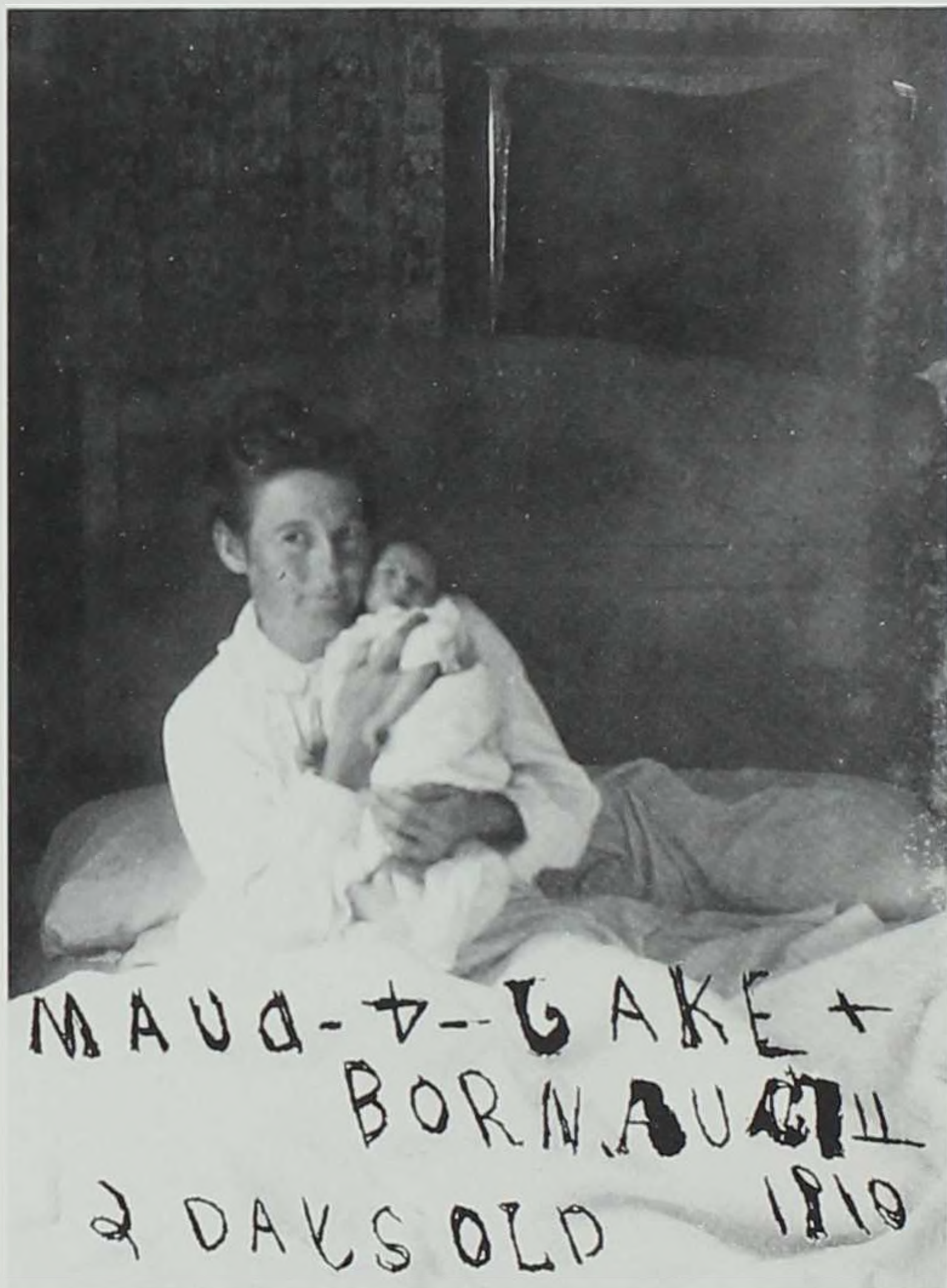


Donald, George, and Seth Smith and Charles McDonald pause from work, as one of the men holds a sign that reads, "General Manager Smith Ranch." Garbison's notes explain that the men are hauling "ashes in manure spreader from burnt straw stack in wheatfield that made 43 bu pr acre." (August 16, 1912)



John Garbison labeled this photograph "Comic Garbisons." His son Murrel (see detail) finds himself in the middle of a ticklish situation in the family peach orchard. (June 23, 1916)





Garbison labeled the paper sleeve of this image of his newborn son, Jacob: "Maud & Baby Jake born Aug. 11th at 3:10 A.M. Dr. Stumbaugh & Mrs. Ed Graham & Columbia Hain in attendance." (Garbison scratched a similar caption on the glass plate negative, succeeding fairly well in writing backwards on the emulsion side.) The child was named after his grandfather, Jacob Garbison, a Civil War veteran and long-time Methodist minister. Like his grandfather, Jake became a minister in adult life, serving the congregation of the Milo Christian Union Church from 1940 to 1944. (August 17, 1910)



Garbison labeled this image, "Sep 1910. Elmer Lizzie Olive and Marion Parks." Census records reveal that the Parks [or Park] family lived near the Garbisons' 81-acre farm in Belmont Township. The names of other families whom Garbison photographed appear on the township map in the 1915 Warren County farm atlas.



To ensure that two-month-old Jake is the star of this photo, Garbison had his wife Maud assume the role of backdrop in the parlor bedroom. (October 11, 1910)



Siblings Rhea, Jake (in foreground), and Murrel Garbison sample watermelons. (August 12, 1911)



A successful rabbit-hunting expedition is documented as Murrel Garbison (right) and friend recreate their prowess for the camera. (Circa 1915)



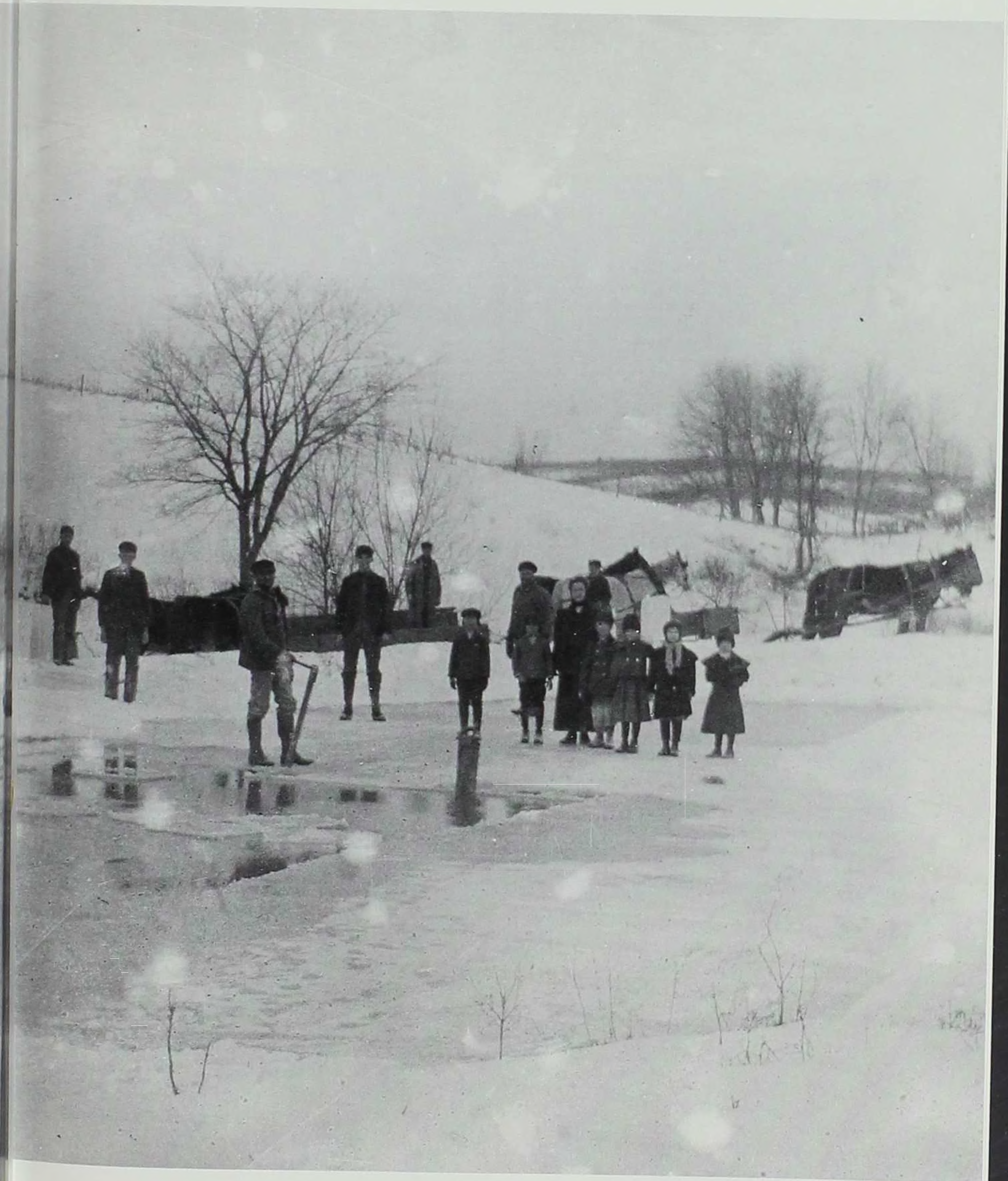
This photo captures two subjects in which the photographer took great pride — his son Jake and his apple orchard. The caption on the sign says: "May 11th 1911 Jake among the Apple Blossoms." In a recent interview, Jake's widow, Bessie Garbison, shared family accounts of how relatives enjoyed home-grown fruit when visiting John Garbison's farm.



Murrel Garbison (left), known locally as a skillful sheep shearer, appears to be practicing his stockman's grip here, with siblings Jake and Rhea. (Circa 1914)

Right: Two days before Christmas, friends and neighbors help John and Murrel Garbison harvest ice from a family pond. The *Indianola Herald* reported a bumper crop of ice for Warren County in the winter of 1909. Garbison noted on the photo sleeve "cloudy about 12-40 P.M." and identified the group on the right as "School teacher & schollars." The image is unusual in that it shows a small-scale ice harvest from a farm pond, rather than a larger, commercial operation. (December 23, 1909)







"Grandpa Ramzey who is verry sick with canser on right side of neck and face," John Garbison labeled this image, taken on December 15, 1912, just weeks before John Van Dyke Ramsey died. The man in the background is identified as "Jack." Although Garbison would have had to travel eleven miles (perhaps half a day's journey by buggy) to reach the Ramsey home, this may have been the last opportunity to create an image of Ramsey before he died.



A week after hauling ashes (see page 28) young Donald Smith enjoys some leisure time. Here he rests his stilts momentarily for a photo beside the pond on his family's farm. (August 24, 1912)



"Thur 4 May 1911 Alva Riche & Russell Wallace tiling on my place. Darko 60 counts." Note the clay drainage tiles and tools lying above the ditch. The phrase "Darko 60 counts" suggests that Garbison exposed the glass plate negative to sixty counts of light when he printed the image on "Darko" brand printing-out paper.



Maud, Murrel, and Rhea Garbison and guests escape the heat of a summer afternoon by enjoying ice cream in a cool patch of buffalo moss. (July 7, 1910)