

J. P. Doremus and his Floating Photograph Gallery

by Paul C. Juhl

NO ONE CAN BE SURE when the idea first came to John P. Doremus. It may have been when he crossed the Mississippi River on one of his return trips to Mitchell County, Iowa, in the late 1860s or early 1870s. It may have occurred to him while working in one of his nicely appointed photographic studios in New Jersey — or perhaps as he sought out vistas to photograph in the New Jersey hills and valleys surrounding Paterson, his native city. At any rate, it was an idea that would consume several summers of his life in the 1870s and early 1880s, and would create an unparalleled photographic history of the Mississippi River valley.

The idea was an ambitious one. Doremus planned to build a “floating photograph gallery.” The gallery — an elaborate flatboat — would be equipped with cameras and house a darkroom and studio as well as living quarters for Doremus. In this floating gallery, Doremus would travel down the Mississippi from the river’s source in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico, capturing the beauty of the river and documenting the lives of the people who lived along it.

Being a businessman as well as an artist, he hoped to profit from his investment of five thousand dollars by selling his photographs in the popular new format called stereographs (or stereo views). In anticipation of the investment return, Doremus named his boat the *Success*.

Although Doremus was certainly no stranger to the Midwest, his roots were in the East. Born on July 21, 1827, near Paterson, New

Jersey, to parents of old Dutch families, Doremus’s first career was that of a painter-glazier, a skill he learned as an apprentice. In 1852, at the age of twenty-five, he married Sarah Schoonmaker and, two years later, the first of their seven children, Harry, was born. In 1856, the young couple and their son accompanied Sarah’s brother to frontier Iowa, where they settled near the newly platted village of Riceville in Mitchell County, Iowa. That autumn the family encountered first-hand the rigors of life on the Iowa prairie. A prairie fire on October 2 “covered a wide stretch of country, and destroyed the stacks of grain and hay of the few early settlers,” according to an 1883 county history. “Mrs. Deremus [*sic*] saved their house, after the supply of water had run out, by pouring milk on the angry flames.”

After the birth in Iowa of their second son, the Doremus family evidently decided to return to the East. Back in Paterson, New Jersey, Doremus switched careers and entered the relatively new profession of photography in 1863 and perfected his skills throughout the decade. His diary, started in 1867, documents the expansion of his New Jersey portrait studios; by the mid-1870s, two sons, Harry and Leonard, had entered the business.

Prospering as a portrait photographer, Doremus undoubtedly saw the artistic and financial potential of innovations such as the stereograph, which used twin photographs to create a sense of depth. Doremus was intrigued by this format, realizing that the perception of depth would enhance landscape photography. The overwhelming popularity of



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John P. Doremus and his family gather to view stereographs — a leisure and educational activity of thousands of American families in the late nineteenth century. From left: Martha (“Mattie”), wife Sarah, Annie, John P., Harry, and Leonard. Doremus’s family sometimes shared his photographic adventures on the Mississippi.