

## **Thanks to photography, We can picture early Vicksburg**

If your family is anything like mine, you have literally hundreds of photographs, including priceless shots of now-deceased family members along with a good selection of faceless feet and body-less heads. In this age of instant photographs, throw-away cameras and digital images stored on computers, it's hard to imagine a time when every detail of life wasn't automatically captured on film. It's also easy to forget that someday our own casual photographs will actually provide a historical record of our life and times for future generations— that is, IF someone remembered to write names and dates on the back.

Because early picture-taking involved complicated and expensive equipment and procedures, it was a job for the professional. Early photographs of Vicksburg and its residents were taken by a handful of local craftsmen. And it is the work of these men, Campbell, Dorrance, Van Hooser, Brink, Corwin, Watson, Clark, Joy and Koons, which provides us with our only clues to what Vicksburg and its people actually looked like a hundred years and more ago.

The term “photography” is Greek for “writing with light”. Sir John Herschel popularized it in 1839 in a speech he made to the Royal Society of London in which he introduced the concept of photography to the world. But it wasn't until Louis Daguerre refined the work of several other men, resulting in the production of the first permanent images, that photography appeared to have a real future.

While Daguerre's method, called the Daguerreotype, produced a photographic image on a metal plate which could not be duplicated, by 1857 portrait studios, parlors and galleries boomed with business and everyone was asking the question, “Have you been taken yet?”

Advances in technology came quickly, with experiments using egg whites, gun cotton (cellulose nitrate), and alcohol to produce images on tin or glass plates. These advances opened new doors, not only technically, but socially as well. Victorian society suddenly went photo crazy. Everyone and everything became suitable subject matter for the professional photographer, as the public became more and more enthralled with the idea of capturing on a plate, and later on paper, the faces and activities of everyday life. While most people probably viewed having portraits taken of one's family members, house or street as simply a fun, fashionable thing to do, the resulting photographs have provided a most accurate glimpse into the lives of our ancestors.

The Vicksburg area has been home to a number of photographers through the years, beginning at least as early as the 1870's. Clarissa Richardson wrote to her brother in 1871 about a neighbor's wish to have a child's “likeness” copied, noting “...there is a good artist here now”. Photographers were routinely referred to as “artists”. There was something mysterious and magical about the whole process,

and it was something only trained people could do. Many of them, in fact, *were* true artists, skillfully costuming and composing their subjects with props and backdrops, much as a painter arranges a still life to be captured on canvas.

This unknown photographer's work would have been almost exclusively portraits of individuals, taken in his studio. Many photographic studios of this time were set up on the roof of a building, as natural sunlight was necessary for proper exposure. The sitter was placed in an elegant, fashionable chair, and his head was secured in a clamp to prevent movement. Exposure times were about one minute long, during which time the subject had to sit still and blink as little as possible. This accounts for the fact that so many early pictures make the subjects appear as though they were stiffly staring into the camera – they were. No one ever smiled for their picture, either. Just imagine trying to hold a natural-looking smile for a minute or more without moving. For all these reasons, photographing children was especially difficult, and most photographers charged more for pictures including children.

We don't know much about Edwin Brink and Dwight Corwin, two local photographers during the 1870's and 1880's, but one local artist better known was Charles E. Dorrance. He set up shop in the Smalley Block, where the *Commercial-Express* office is now located, in 1885, advertising himself as the proprietor of Dorrance's Photo Gallery. No doubt Dorrance utilized a front room as a combination waiting room and gallery. Here he would artfully display examples of his work in as elegant a setting as possible, complete with luxurious furniture for the comfort of his waiting clients. A talented musician who also served as leader of the Vicksburg Cornet Band until he moved out of town in 1888, Dorrance left behind many portraits as examples of his excellent work, some of which are part of the Vicksburg Museum's collection.

George W. Campbell may have bought out Mr. Dorrance, as in 1896 he is listed as being in business in the Smalley Block. A September 30, 1896 issue of *The Kalamazoo Daily Telegraph* noted that, "Mr. Campbell is a young and progressive man and keeps informed on all the new methods for improving his art. He uses the aristo platino, sepia and highly glossed finish as his patrons may prefer. Mr. Campbell guarantees his work, which may be seen in the most refined homes in Vicksburg and vicinity..."

Other early photographers known to have worked in Vicksburg include a Mr. Van Hooser, G. H. Clark, Fred Clark and a Mr. Watson, who was active in 1898. Fred Clark left behind a number of nice portraits taken outdoors, rather than posed in the studio, indicating that equipment and techniques had by that time advanced to the point where the photographer was no longer limited to studio work.

However, it is to S. D. Joy and William Koons that we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude for their work in recording the visual aspects of everyday life in their

era. It is their photographs that we turn to time and time again to learn how our town looked in the early days of the 1900's.

S. D. Joy began business in Lake Odessa in 1886. Three years later he and his family came to Vicksburg. In 1901 he built the Joy Building at 110 West Washington, which stands today, to house both his family, which included his wife and daughter Alice Viola, and his studio and gallery. He designed his top-floor studio to take advantage of natural light through skylights. Billing himself as an "Artistic Photographer", he seems to have quickly built an excellent reputation due in part to the talent of his wife. The 1904 *Wolverine Crank* reported, "Mrs. Joy attends personally to the posing and sittings for all fancy pictures and her artistic taste is acknowledged". The article went on to state that, "The studio is equipped with all modern apparatus and is progressive in every particular." Members of the Congregational Church, the Joys were pillars of local society.

Looking over the Joy photos in the Museum's collection, the artistic touch of Mrs. Joy is quickly evident. As equally apparent is the technical expertise of her husband, as reflected by images so crisp and clear that for just a moment you actually feel as though you could walk right into the photograph.

In 1907 the business was sold to William Koons. Many photos exist today tagged "Joy & Koons", leading one to believe the two must have operated the studio together at one time.

Many of Joy and Koons best photographic efforts can be found on post cards. Post cards became a universal communications tool in the late 1890's with the establishment of the Rural Free Delivery System that guaranteed regular mail delivery to homes in smaller towns and rural areas. By 1906 Rural Free Delivery was well established, and sending postcards – remember, this was before most people had telephones – became a way of life.

Post card publishers worked day and night to meet the demand for new views, with everyone wanting to send a card to distant friends and relatives that showed off the highlights of the old home town. Both Joy and Koons took many, many photos of homes, streets, businesses and individuals, which were printed on post card blanks and snapped up by the post card-writing public. Many simply collected images of subjects that appealed to them, pasting them in albums like we do our photographs of today.

Joy and Koons portraiture work was an important part of their business, and often approached actual art in the posing and costuming of their subjects and in the beautiful and unusual mounting of the finished photographs. Both men, but particularly S. D. Joy, seemed to be especially adept at bringing out the best in children – but again, this may reflect more on Mrs. Joy's talents.

William Koons bought the Wonderland Theatre in 1911 from Omar Smith, who had built it as the Garden Theatre a few years earlier. While we don't know for

sure, this change of business may well have marked the end of the era when the “Artistic Photographer” was the only one who had the equipment and ability to record the face of Vicksburg and its residents.

George Eastman introduced the first roll film in 1884, and by 1900 had created hand-held cameras that anyone could own and operate satisfactorily. With people able to take their own “snap shots”, the role of the professional photographer gradually became once again primarily that of portrait-taker. Vicksburg has had many excellent professional photographers in its business community from the era of Corwin, Campbell and Dorrance right up to the present day. And while we no longer run around asking friends, “Have you been taken yet?” photographs remain a most important way to capture history as we live it – especially if someone remembers to write the names and dates on the back.

*-- By Maggie Snyder for the Commercial-Express*