

Abraham Bogardus, "Thirty-seven Years Behind a Camera," February 1884

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THIRTY-SEVEN YEARS BEHIND A CAMERA.

BY ABRAM [Abraham—ed.] BOGARDUS.

IN September, 1846, I spent two weeks with Mr. George W. Prosch, receiving instructions in the then new and wonderful process of daguerreotyping.

I paid fifty dollars for instructions and a complete set of apparatus, consisting of a quarter-size camera and a stand with three legs, two coating boxes, a mercury bath, a hand buff, a clamp head-rest to attach to a chair, and a clasp to hold the plate while being buffed. With this outfit I commenced business.

To have a daguerreotype taken was the ambition of every aspiring man. It was a great event to most sitters. A black suit, a white vest, and thumb in the arm-hole of the vest, the other hand holding an open book—an attitude of importance—was considered just the thing.

It was a difficult matter then to make a picture. The silvered-surface plate, after being properly polished, was subjected to the vapors of iodine and bromine, and after the exposure developed over heated mercury; sometimes we obtained a picture, but more often we did not. Often after repeated trials the sitter was told to come another day, as the chemicals would not work.

A sitting required from *forty seconds* to *four minutes*. At that date all worked by side-lights; there was but one sky-light in the city, and that was in the Granite Building, corner of Broadway and Chambers Street. The light was some six or seven nights up stairs from the street and was made to revolve, so as to keep the back of the sitter toward the sun. Soon after this most of the fraternity built skylights; then the work improved. Sittings being made in much shorter time, and much better effects of light and shade were produced.

The years 1847 and 1848 saw some elegant pictures made. Gurney, Lawrence, Anthony, Edwards & Clark, Brady, Inslee [Insley—ed.], Becker, Prosch, Plumb, Whitehurst, Lewis, and others made work that beat the *world*. The daguerreotypes made in Europe did not compare with the *Yankee work*.

We were now masters of the chemicals, and produced pictures with certainty, and the time of sitting was reduced to ten or twenty seconds. One of our greatest difficulties was to get the plate clean enough to be sensitive in damp weather. The buff used in polishing being tilled with rouge, would naturally attract the dampness, and if the buff was damp, a

good impression could not be obtained. Many driers were made and patented to keep the buff dry in any weather; the one made by Mr. Lewis I found effective.

Thousands of the pictures made at this time are still in existence and are as good as ever. I have some now in my possession that are as good as on the day they were made. Sometimes they were covered by a film from the action of the air. This could be removed by the application of hyposulphite of soda or cyanide of potassium. One or both properly used will clean them instantly.

About this time a man named Hill proclaimed to the world that he was able to reproduce colors in the daguerreotype. This announcement produced a great sensation. It was a secret with him, and only to be divulged on payment of a round sum. A meeting of the fraternity was called on an appointed evening at the gallery of Mr. Lawrence. and a committee with full powers was sent to visit Mr. Hill and report. I think Mr. Gurney was one of that committee. They visited the great discoverer and found him unwilling to show his wonderful products to men so thoroughly posted in the use of chemicals. The committee returned, having seen enough to convince them that his claim was false and his pretension a humbug.

In making the daguerreotype, we went from the wet to the dry process. At first, the bromine was used in liquid form, afterward we used it dry, being absorbed by dry lime. And also the iodine was at first covered with water to prevent its evaporating too fast; afterward we used it dry.

The smell of turpentine in the building rendered it impossible to get an impression. I remember while the building I occupied was being painted outside, the windows being opened, I was compelled to stop work until the odor of the turpentine was gone.

I shall always remember with pleasure the good old daguerreotype.

No glass to clean and albuminize; no black fingers; few or no re-sittings; no retouching; no proofs to show for the grandmother and the aunts to find fault with; no waiting for sunshine to print with; no paper to blister; and no promising of the pictures next week if the weather was good.

The picture was gilded, finished, and cased while the lady was putting on her bonnet, delivered, put in her hand, and you had the money for it in your pocket.

I have yet to see the picture made with a camera equal to the daguerreotype.

Yet that process, like the photograph, required great care in manipulation, and only by experience could you make good work.

It was a rarity to hear any person say, "It does not look like me;" it was a known certainty that the impression on the plate was a likeness of the sitter. There was no disputing the fact. Yet I remember a man saying to me one day, "My picture looks like the *devil*." I told him I had never seen that personage and could not say as to the resemblance, but sometimes a likeness ran all through families.

After awhile cheap operators commenced to be heard of. I once had a hearty laugh in visiting a 25-cent gallery. The ninth-size picture was made and inserted in a cheap case for that amount of money. Sitters paid their money at the desk and received a numbered check. Under the sky-light the operator and his assistant stood, one at the camera and the other at the head-rest, and that interesting accessory was jammed against the head of No. 13 as soon as he touched the chair, the plate exposed, and he was ordered to step out, and No. 14 called. The so-called picture was delivered to him in the next room, and if he had any complaints to make, he was told to buy another ticket and go through again.

Among the fraternity there existed a rivalry; jokes were passed and ridiculous things done. Many of the best operators advertised sky-light pictures; one man without a sky-

light exhibited in his showcase a picture of two men boxing, and labeled it "sky-lark" pictures.

One said in his show-case, "Notice particularly the eye;" another, to ridicule him, had a picture of a bruiser with his eye blackened in a fight, and said, "Notice particularly the eye." One man had a show-case where he placed pictures that had not been called for, and labeled them "Shades of the departed."

I knew a man who had made a picture of a sitter with a streaked plate. When asked what made the streak across the face, he said it was the shadow of the telegraph wire in front of the window.

There were miserable botches then as well as now. An operator came from Williamsburg to have me show him what his trouble was. I coated a plate, and posing the office-boy, focused the camera. He asked me if I focused *every time*; he thought once in the morning would last all day. A man came from Pennsylvania to get posted a little. He said he could not pay much for the information, as he worked at it only when he had no roofing to do.

We had plenty of trouble then with shirt-collars. Unless the collar stood x, the stylish young gent of that day passed a sleepless night. After trying in vain to suit a man one day, I told him I would take his collar on a separate plate.

I had one old gentleman who often came to me for his picture, but he was never suited. He wore a white choker about five inches high, and his head was far above the level of it. I always tried to get his head down so as to obtain a view of his face without looking up his nostrils, but as soon as I touched the head-rest he would complain of his position not being natural, and up went the head. He is now dead, and I am sure the undertaker had a neat job, as he was easily "laid out."

One woman came with three children, a hobby-horse, a drum and a doll. She wished the children taken in a group. The case selected was the quarter-size, for a plate 8 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches. The girl, Angelina, was to hold the doll, but the family had not decided whether Master Charles Frederick Augustus should ride the horse and John William Henry hold the drum, or whether John William Henry should ride the horse and Charles Frederick Augustus beat the drum. They had agreed to let my superior taste and judgment decide that momentous question. After I had settled that the mother said she did not want the children all close together, as all the "dagger-types" was taken. She wanted Angelina in the middle of the room, one of the boys by the "winder," and the other across the room. Well, it did seem a brilliant idea, but how my little quarter-size camera was to reach them all I could not see. I tried to explain the capabilities of lenses, the concentration of light, etc., etc., but she understood about as much of it as I did about the Choctaw language.

I well remember an old lady who, after sitting about half the required time, raised up both hands and exclaimed: "Stop it ! Stop it!! I winked."

Another old lady, after being carefully posed was left sitting while I stepped outside the screen, holding my watch and marking the seconds. When I walked to the camera to put on the cap, she was standing by the window looking in the street.

The finding of gold in California was a great benefit to the daguerreotypists. On steamer days the gallery would be filled with miners in rough suits, carrying their mining tools and a pair of pistols in the belt. We made several sittings before one left the chair, and usually sold them all to him.

The oldest man I ever photographed was 108, another was 104 years old. The youngest child was three days, and the oldest woman, well, "I never mention it;" and the oldest couple—man and wife—whose combined ages was one hundred and ninety-one.

I have posed nearly all the Tom Thumbs and giants of the age. I have made pictures of *four* Presidents of the United States, and of one who was President of the Senate and Acting President for a few hours after the death of President Lincoln, until Vice-President Johnson took the oath of office; of Governors of States, a great number; of U. S. Senators, very many; and have even condescended to take a New York Alderman once in a while. A call, well remembered, was to go to the Tombs and daguerreotype a murderer who was to be hanged in a few days.

Once I had a horse walk up three flights of stairs to be photographed under the skylight. I have taken the pictures of cats, dogs, a live owl, a live squirrel, and once an OLD HEN. She was *standing* while I made the *sitting*. It was so "eggs-act" she never came back to "set" again. The plate finally became "foul" and was "laid" side.

It has been said the working with chemicals is unhealthy. When I commenced, I weighed about 135 lbs., and was a slim young man. You can judge whether it has hurt me. I now weigh 190.

Some queer things have happened:

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FULL LENGTH AND LIFE-SIZE.—Pat wanted his picture life-size in a four-inch case. When told it would not hold a life-size, "Then," said he, "take it with the legs hanging down."

A mother brought some wax to stick her boy's ears back.

SINGULAR EXPRESSION OF A JUDGE.—"Now, judge," said a friend, "look dignified; look just as you did the last time you sentenced a man to be hung." "Well," said the judge, "I don't know about that, as the man was reprieved."

I have been praised by many—generally by good-looking subjects—and abused by some who did not happen to be good-looking. Many people seem to think we make their looks. I only copy their looks.

"I don't like that picture," said Pat. "Me nose turns up and me mouth turns down, and no man has a white speck in his eye."

I have had stout ladies by the thousand who wanted to look thinner, as they were "just then stouter than usual," and the same number of thin ones who wanted to be rounded out some.

Often in old daguerreotype days, we used "plumpers," as we called them, a wad of cotton inserted in the cheeks to fill them out.

I have had scores of children willing to sit and been told, "What a faculty you have of getting along with the children," and scores who would not sit and kicked the mother when she tried to force them; and I have been told, "I see you do not have much knack in taking children."

There were any number of patented new things offered for a consideration; patentmongers were after us constantly, offering wonderful chances to control their pretensions and make a fortune. Sometimes I bought them and generally "burnt my fingers." My distrust in new things may have kept me from investing in some that were good.

I did not buy the carbon process and think I saved one hundred dollars. I have not been willing to adopt every visionary scheme that was offered, but have stood shoulder to shoulder with the men who have by skill, judgment, and work brought photography up to its present standard.

I well remember the first photograph I ever saw. I was told that a German lady was making pictures on paper. She was located, if I remember right, either in White or Walker Streets, near Broadway. I went to see them. They were quite large—I should say 12 x 14 inches, and I did not think such coarse, rough pictures would ever take the place of the clear and elegant silver daguerreotype.

Soon the journals, one edited by H. H. Snelling and the other, called *Humphrey's Journal*, published pictures on paper called photographs, and stated that they were first made on glass, and gave the surprising fact that an unlimited number could be made from a negative. These prints were on plain paper. The albumen surface was not then known.

One by one the daguerreotypists attempted the paper picture, but they were sorry looking things compared with the work of to-day. Soon another new thing came along. A friend of mine just returned from Europe showed me a *carte de visite*. It was a little thing, though full length, a man standing by a fluted column, the head about twice the size of the head of a pin. I laughed at that, little thinking I should, at a day not far distant, be making them at the rate of a thousand a day.

Here I should mention the ambrotype on glass, some on the single glass and others put up by sealing two pieces of glass together with balsam of fir. This sealing was patented, and they were perfectly durable.

I also speak of the bromide patent, the terrible bugbear to the photographers of that day. The patent was soon to expire, and the owner had applied for a re-issue. A convention of the photographers of the United States was called, and a meeting held, I believe, in this very room. A committee was appointed to go to Washington with counsel and prevent the re-issue. I had the honor of being one of that committee. We went to Washington, and the bromide patent was strangled after a hard fight.

Another serious trouble, as many of you will recollect, was the fixing of a revenue stamp on the back of each and every picture. The cost of the stamps was a large item, and the sticking on—well, I did not do it myself. I tried a young man, but he was not equal to the task. I then tried a young girl, thinking her tongue could go pretty fast, but she gave out, and finally called in the aid of a sponge.

I claim more for photography than mere dollars and cents, and that but few of us are paid for our labor. We must show our taste in every picture. Indeed, the operator of to-day needs more judgment than in most professions. To stand at the camera and suit the lights and accessories to each varying face and complexion, to be compelled to listen to the ridiculous requests of the Flora McFlimseys and the exquisite dudes, the anxious mother who wishes her crying babe taken with a smile, and a thousand other equally ridiculous demands,—all this time to keep in good temper and do the work in the short space of time allowed to each sitter, is something that can be done by few.

We are compelled to spend much of our time in gratifying the whims of our sitters. Many people seem to think we are to make pictures of them merely to let them see whether they like their own looks.

“Will you pose me until I am satisfied ?” said a man to me one day. “No, sir; I do not know that you will ever be satisfied. I will pose you until I get a good picture of you; but many people are not satisfied with their own looks; if so, how can I satisfy you ?”

An old lady with wrinkled face said: “Now, Mr. Burgurdis, I know I shan't like my picture; I am sure it will look ugly.” I agreed with her.

“I had just as leave go to the dentist,” has been told me, as nearly as I can remember, nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine times.

A widow from Fifth Avenue rode up in a carriage. She weighed 240 pounds, wore a low-neck dress, and had a skin verging on the color of a boiled lobster, and face painted. The transaction closed with her telling me she thought the picture perfectly horrible. I thought so myself; it looked so much like her.

Innumerable people have been tried by all the great artists, and they *can't be taken*, at least, they say so. One man said he was tired out in trying; "he could not be taken." I told him I had a camera that would take anybody or anything. Yet I have known men who seemed too mean to cast a shadow.

An aristocratic lady from one of the avenues came to see me in relation to making a picture of her mother. Somebody had sent her to me. She said her mother had been taken several times, but had been so unfortunate as never to have had a good one. I requested her to bring the unfortunate pictures with her when she came. She brought two miserable twenty-five-cent totypes. She had indeed been unfortunate.

A woman came in blustering one morning. She wished to have a re-sitting. That picture did not look like *her*. Everybody said it looked twenty years older than she did, etc., etc. As she passed up the stairs, the two ladies accompanying her said: "The ugly old thing. It looks just like her. She only wants to try another dress."

A woman brought her daughter who unfortunately was very badly *squint-eyed*. Her eyes were not mates. "Now," she said, "if you will notice very particularly, you will see she has a *slight* cast in one eye." Well, I saw it.

I must not fail to mention the thousands of intelligent people who knew what to expect in their pictures and were suited with a good one, and I am happy to be able to say the intelligent ones are largely in the majority.

Eyes.—Only think of the many eyes I have taken. Squint eyes, cross eyes, small eyes, large eyes, staring eyes, eyes so small that they hardly seemed to answer the purpose of seeing with, dead-looking eyes without one particle of expression, and oh! how many *beautiful* eyes.

Mouths.—Small mouths, large mouths, crooked mouths, mouths that turn up at the corners, mouths that turn down at the corners, and the many beautiful mouths, sweet mouths that would make a young man smack his lips and wish he could smack 'em.

And then the noses. Long noses, short noses, crooked noses, Grecian noses, flat noses, pug noses, many a blossom nose, and noses so perfect that they gave beauty to the whole face.

We are a body of men engaged in the development of an art-science. We take the chemical substance and by the aid of the light which God has so bountifully dispensed we copy and fix the image of objects animate and inanimate, the things of life and beauty, the babe with its smile or weeping, the maiden in her youth and hopefulness, man in his vigor and strength, the mother with her dear ones around her, the aged parents, loved and revered,—all must be pictured and the dear lineaments distributed.

I claim a high standard for photography. Is there an eclipse of the sun? photography will trace it second by second and give you a perfect picture of it. Do you wish to see the wonders that surround you? the microscope will magnify the most infinitesimal object and photography will picture it, and you can examine it at your leisure.

Do you wish to travel round the world and not leave your own parlor? photography will give you not only every land from the rising to the setting of the sun, and the inhabitants, too, of every clime, perfectly pictured before you.

You must have a good light, a good camera, chemicals in order, and know how to use them; but the principal ingredients must be brains. Oh! that every man in the profession would try to EXCEL rather than to UNDERSELL.

Photography has been disgraced by making pictures that are unfit to be shown among intelligent people. Photography has been used to gratify the lowest and most degraded desires. I call on every member of this Section to give his influence to put a stop to this curse, this blot, upon photography.

We have seen the wonderful improvements made step by step, and who can tell what the next ten years may show us.

Whether we use our plate *wet* or *dry*, let not our hearts be *dry* to every emotion of respect for our fellow-workers. If our fingers are sometimes stained, let not our hearts be *blackened* by unworthy motives; and while we use the *iron*, let us not be *hardened* by feelings of envy toward each other.

I hope just such meetings as this, where we see each other face to face, may be the means of giving us all *nobler* aims, and that we may unite to raise our art *higher* and HIGHER, until it shall take the place it deserves among the beautiful, as it is already classed as one of the most wonderful known to man.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This text is a transcript of a paper read by Bogardus on 5 February 1884 to the Photographic Section of the American Institute. (See page 85 of issue.)

Abraham Bogardus was one of the daguerreotype's most vocal champions and continued to make daguerreotypes well beyond its fall from favor. In 1869, Andrew Khrono was described as "the oldest man in the photographic business in this country, still making daguerreotypes for Bogardus."¹

Bogardus' reference to a "25-cent gallery" may well be the "German system" gallery of Charles R. Rees. See *Daguerreotype Directory, Reese & Co's German system of Photography and picture Making, No. 289 Broadway, New York* (New York: Oliver & Brother, Steam Job Printers, 1854). (Please note the incorrect spelling of the last name, which is correctly spelled "Rees.")

Later years would find Bogardus very active in both lecture and written reminiscences about his experiences with the daguerreotype. The present text is among the first of his reminiscences. He is best known for his article "The Lost Art of the Daguerreotype," *Century Magazine* (New York) 68:1 (May 1904): 83–91.²

Other writings by Bogardus in both photographic and popular press include: "A Day in the Sky-light" [a poem—ed.], *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (New York) 14:158 (February 1884): 86–87; a extemporaneous biographical speech recorded in "Photographic Section of the American Institute," *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* (New York) 17:10 (22 May 1886): 310–14;³ "Forty Years Behind the Camera," *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (New York) (19 November 1886): 604–606 and (26 November 1886): 614–15; "Forty Years Behind the Camera," *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* (New York) 17: 22 (27 November 1886): 679–81 and 17:23 (11 December 1886): 714–16;⁴ "Trials and Tribulations of the Photographer," *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* (New York) 20:5 (9 March 1889): 139 and 20:6 (23 March 1889): 178–81; "Trials and Tribulations of the Photographer," *British Journal of Photography* 36:1506 (15 March 1889): 183–84 and 36:1507 (22 March 1889): 200–201; "Experiences of a Photographer," *Lippincott's Magazine* (Philadelphia) vol. 47 (May 1891): 574–82; "The Daguerreotype," *St. Louis and Canadian Photographer* 11:12 (December 1893): 534–38; "Early Picture

Taking: Recollections of the Days of the Daguerreotypes," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 54:332 (1 December 1894): 10; "Leaves From the Diary of a Photographer," *St. Louis and Canadian Photographer* 13:1 (January 1895): 25–26; "The Days of the Daguerreotype," *Youth's Companion* (Boston) 77:18 ("May Special Number," 30 April 1903): 210–11⁵; "The Days of the Daguerreotype," *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (New Orleans) (5 June 1903): 6; "Fifty Years a Photographer," *Wilson's Photographic Magazine* (New York) 41:575 (November 1904): 483–87.

For a brief biographical profile of Bogardus, see "Abraham Bogardus, Photographer," in *New York's Great Industries: Exchange and Commercial Review* (New York and Chicago: Historical Publishing Company, 1884): 113.

1. "Note," *Philadelphia Photographer* 6:65 (May 1869): 169.
2. <http://daguerre.org/resource/texts/bogardus/bogardus.html>
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8860001_GARDN-2_ANTHONYS_1886-05-22.pdf
4. Bogardus intended to publish "Forty Years Behind a Camera" as a book of "about 270 pages" with Lippincott as the publisher. See "Forty Years Behind a Camera," *St. Louis and Canadian Photographer* 7:6 (June 1889): 253.
5. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P9030002_BOGARDUS_YOUTH-COMP_1903-04-30.pdf

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