

Alexander Hesler, "Photographing Lightning," 1892

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PHOTOGRAPHING LIGHTNING.

THIS is a very easy thing to do if you can have the lightning to play for you at the right time. Very few have an idea how the thing is done.

The playful "critter" can only be caught in the night, and if the camera, properly "loaded," is pointed at the right direction at the right time it simply takes itself. The only trouble is to be ready at the right time.

My first attempt to take a flash of lightning was on July 4, 1854, at 10 P.M., and was a perfect success. I have never seen it equaled. I used a (4/4) 6² x 8² daguerreotype plate, placed the camera on top of a tall building, focused on the clouds as the lightning discharged from one cloud to another, then pointed in the direction where the display was the most vivid, until I had twenty or more pass across the lens; then turned in another direction, where there was a brilliant display, and received several discharges.

On developing the plate I had it nearly covered with banks of clouds plainly shown, with the electrical discharges passing from one cloud to another, illuminating the clouds in a very beautiful and distinct manner. In all there were over fifty discharges passing over and through the clouds. All of them proved that in nature there are no sharp zigzag angles, but all rounded more or less.

This plate, and thousands of other rare pictures, was destroyed in the great Chicago fire in 1871. I have been trying for the last fifteen years to get another similar copy of the heavens, but the same conditions have not occurred in the night time. In order to get these displays the storm must have passed you, and be just at the right distance to show in your picture. If you are in the storm, or the clouds too near you, all that can be had is a single flash or streak across the plate, while the rest is all blackness. You must sit up and watch for the conditions and be ready when they occur, and success is yours.

A. Hesler.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Hesler was not the first to make a daguerreotype of lightning. Thomas Easterly, of St. Louis, accomplished the feat 18 June 1847. Although the original daguerreotype is lost, an 1870s photographic copy of the image is in the collection of the Missouri Historical Society.¹

In 1994, the contemporary daguerreotypist Robert Shlaer also successfully made daguerreotypes of lightning.

1. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mohistory/4379816877/>

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