

“Discovering an Early WNY Photographer”

By Jeanne N. Treat

It was the dead of winter, 1998. My mother, an antique dealer from North Tonawanda, was approached to buy out the contents of an estate in the southern tier. We met with an elderly lady named Ann, who described what we were getting into. Located in Brant, NY, the property consisted of a farmhouse from the turn of the century, a barn, and several outbuildings. Vacant for many years, there was no heat, running water, or electricity. We believed that the trip would be worthwhile, as the estate contained antique furniture, glass, paper goods, and farm implements.

We purchased the contents and received the keys to the old house. With receipt in hand, my mother, sisters, and brother-in-law rented two large moving vans and headed south. The day was cold and it was snowing lightly. The southern tier scenery was breathtaking, reminiscent of a Norman Rockwell painting of a winter scene. As my mind wandered, I imagined traveling this road in a wagon drawn by horses.

By the time we got to the estate, we were eager to get started. We parked the vans, entered the old house, and discovered that we could see our breath. For the first time in my life, I understood the expression “colder than a barn”.

The house had been vacant for many years, and everything was covered with a layer of dust. We agreed to leave the place empty, so we dug in and started hauling. There was a dining room set, a piano, a Victrola, and boxes of glassware and paper goods. Barely able to feel our fingers, we entered the barn and took down an old sleigh that was suspended from the ceiling by leather straps. In a mud room attached to the kitchen, we discovered a hump back trunk, which we loaded into the van unopened.

It was months before we looked into that trunk and discovered the treasure within. There were more than five hundred glass plate negatives, of photos taken in the early 1900's. At the time, we didn't know what to do with them. You could hold them up to a light and guess what the subject was. One showed a train from the New York line, another a quaint schoolhouse, and many portrayed people going about their lives, working, worshipping, playing, and loving. Out of curiosity, we asked a local photography store to develop a few of them. But it was clear that it would be too expensive to have all five hundred processed. The glass plates sat untouched for many years.

It was the spring of 2004. As a writer of historical fiction, I was interested in the fisher folk of Scotland, and had purchased some prints developed from glass plates taken in the late 1800's. As I displayed the amazing pictures on my wall, I remembered that my mother owned a trunk full of glass plate negatives. What would they contain? Like the prints of the fisher folk, would they paint a picture of a forgotten life style?

A friend at work was a photography buff. I told him about the glass plates, and posed a question. Was there an inexpensive way to see what was on each of the plates? If we knew which ones were the 'good ones', we could have those developed. My friend was enthusiastic about the project and came up with an idea. We would use a light box in a dim room. A high quality digital camera would be suspended over the box and negative, using a tripod. We would snap each plate, bring the picture to digital, and use a photo editing program to invert the negative.

We spent an entire weekend snapping and cataloguing the plates in glassine envelopes, assigning each a number. When we looked at the results, we were surprised.

The pictures represented a photo history of rural Western New York, as well as Niagara Falls, Lake Erie, and a WWI military training camp.

We acquired a film scanner and began the process of converting the negatives to digital format. At first we had to come up with a safe method of handling the plates. Lint-free white gloves were required. The silver emulsion side had to be protected, and the only thing you could use on it was an antistatic brush. The other side could be gently cleaned to remove fingerprints and dust. After months of painstaking preparation and scanning, we had all five hundred images in digital format.

Something happened to me while I worked with the photos. The people in the pictures told a story of a life style that was in harmony with nature. I wanted to know who the photographer was. We identified him using letters, postcards, and hand-written notes on the plate boxes. He was Lynn E. Walters of Brant NY, born in 1891. His parents Michael and Imogene were featured in many of the photos, as well as brother Max and sister Ruthe. Census records told us that his grandparents were German immigrants, and his parents native born. Military records placed Lynn as a Private in the Air Service, WWI, and indicated that he was assigned a photography tent at Camp Hughes. Cemetery records showed that the family was buried together in Brant.

We asked ourselves what we should do with the photos. There were pictures of people in period dress, barbershops, schools, trains, cars, and Indian motorcycles. There were hunting and fishing scenes, and people picking grapes, making barrels, and eating watermelon. There were scenes of people in Victorian dress at Niagara Falls, at a lookout point that no longer exists. A 1909 photo of a crowd watching the flight of the Curtiss Golden Flyer took our breath away. There was even a trip aboard the Great

Lakes steamer “Eastern States”, complete with photos of the bridge and crew. We developed some of the pictures and showed friends and family.

Word got around, and we were asked to do a photography show at a local gallery. From September 9th – 25th, hundreds of these remarkable pictures will be on display in Clarence at the Premier Annex Gallery. You are welcome to join us for a trip back in local history. I think that the photographer would be pleased.

For more information, visit www.antiqueworldmarket.com or call 716-759-0455.

Jeanne Treat is a wife, mother, and author living in Clarence Center, New York. Educated at Buffalo State College in liberal arts and creative writing, she has recently completed a novel set in Scotland in the 1600’s.