

THE ARTISTIC VISION of M



Missoula Camera Club

THE PHOTOGRAPHS on the following pages are part of a remarkable collection of two hundred glass plate negatives in the photographic archives of the Montana Historical Society. They are remarkable not only for their high level of technical excellence, but for their aesthetic composition and subject matter. They are even more remarkable because the photographer, Myrta May Wright Stevens, was both an amateur and a woman.

By ordinary standards, Myrta Stevens made little impress on the history of Montana. H. F. Sanders' 1913 biographical history, for example, contains a great deal of information on Mrs. Stevens' husband, Albert M., but very little information on Mrs. Stevens herself. Mr. Stevens apparently possessed all the proper attributes of a Victorian businessman. According to Sanders, he was "broad-minded and progressive, independent in thought and action, and possesse[d of] a character of high morality and unquestioned integrity." His various business endeavors were then detailed at length. In his native Pennsylvania, A. M. Stevens engaged in the oil business. He then moved to Minnesota, where he engaged in the lumber business.

In 1888 he determined to move to the West Coast in search of new opportunities, but when he stopped in the Bitterroot Valley, he was so impressed by the beauty of western Montana that he determined to settle in Missoula. For two years he worked as a machinist for the Northern Pacific Railroad, then became interested in the fruit commission and grocery business. In 1905 he turned his attention to real estate and mine brokerage. A civic-minded man, Stevens was active in fraternal organizations and, as a staunch Republican, was city alderman, public administrator and mayor of Missoula in 1901 and 1902.

But what of Mrs. Stevens? Sanders writes only that Myrta Stevens was born in Rochester, Minnesota; married in 1882; had three children, Marguerite, Lucille, and Lyman; was an active member of the Rebekah Lodge, and "one of the most popular women in Missoula." Clearly, for this historian, women made their mark in the world solely as wives and mothers, and their character and accomplishments were deemed of little consequence.

Fortunately, Mrs. Stevens' daughter, Marguerite Maloney (now 92) and her husband still reside in Helena,

RTA WRIGHT STEVENS

and they have supplied us with information suggesting the exceptional qualities of Myrta Stevens. The Maloney home, which is still marked by the presence of Mrs. Stevens although she died in 1944, suggests that she was an artistic and cultured woman. It was she who made the delicate woven baskets on the Maloney's piano and the serene watercolor landscapes on the wall and the hand-painted china vases.

But Myrta Stevens was no helpless dilettante, for she matched her husband in independence of mind and resourcefulness, willingly tackling whatever task was at hand. She built the chimney on their Missoula home, and was proficient with a hammer and saw. As president of the Rebekahs, she was not adverse to driving alone over much of the state in a buggy to visit the local lodges. Yet when Montana women won the vote in 1914, Mrs. Stevens, then well into her fifties, told her daughter that the suffragists had gone too far!

Her opinions apparently carried weight in her husband's decisions, but she was not, however, able to overcome his determination to go west. When she and her two daughters came to Missoula to join him in 1889, she did not like what she saw. The West, she thought, was "wild and woolly and full of fleas." Yet with characteristic good humor she faced her new situation and in time came to sincerely like her new home.

Perhaps a part of her adjustment was eased by the fact that in Missoula she discovered the Missoula Camera Club, a group of amateur and professional photographers who shared her enthusiasm for photography. Myrta had taken up photography, an unusual avocation for a woman, while still in Minnesota, and she had a Kodak view box specially made. With this camera she taught herself the techniques of photography. In later years she acquired a more elaborate New Century camera that made the standard five-by-seven glass negatives.

During the summer months of the 1890's, the Missoula Camera Club travelled together over much of western Montana in search of new subjects for their photography, and from amateurs such as E. W. Phillips and professionals such as Frank M. Ingalls she learned new ideas on technique and composition. In a room over the family's buggy shed, Myrta set up a dark room and mastered developing and printing her own negatives.

It is clear that photography was much more than a hobby to her; her pictures were not meant so much to



Myrta Wright Stevens

document her travels and the growth of her children but as an expression of her artist's view of the world. This aesthetic quality is especially apparent in a series of titled views such as a "A Study in Cats and Rabbits" and "Scenic Study in Reflections," and "On Yonder Shore."

The photographs reproduced here indicate that Mrs. Stevens' eye was attracted to the delicate and graceful and to the humorous or ironic detail. A part of her special vision, however, is only apparent as a result of seventy years of hindsight. Constrained by uncomfortable, cumbersome clothing, the people in Myrta Stevens' outdoor photography seem to assume stylized, formal poses for the camera. Closer examination, however, reveals that the photographer had only momentarily interrupted their fun. A humorous detail or a shy smile from out of the past reveals that the people of the 1890's were real people and that they enjoyed themselves in real ways. Thanks to the talents of one almost forgotten artist-photographer we are pleased to share with you a few moments with the Montanans of the 1890's as they enjoyed themselves outdoors in the summer.



A favorite spot for pleasure-seeking Missoulians of the 1890's was the resort of LoLo Hot Springs, a group of non-mineralized springs about thirty miles south of Missoula in the picturesque Bitterroot Valley. The special properties of the water had been noted as early as 1806 when Lewis and Clark camped in the area, which they called Travelers' Rest. Referring to the area in his diary, Clark wrote, "I tasted this water and found it hot and not bad tasted . . . in further examination [sic] I found this water nearly boiling hot at the places it spouted from the rocks. . . . I put my finger in the water. At first I could not bare it a second." Camps of the late Nineteenth Century found the accommodations more luxurious than did Lewis and Clark. Along LoLo Creek Mrs. Stevens came upon the above camping site and photographed the vacationers' cook cleaning up.



At LoLo Hot Springs, Mrs. Stevens took this study of a group of women fishing while the men in their party awaited, in stylized pose, some grouse hunting. Here the photographer's artistic eye was struck by the delicacy of the fishing rods, the spring flowers, and even the lodge pole pine in the background.



Mrs. Stevens and her companion encountered the unknown huntress, seen in the picture on the opposite page, along LoLo Creek. Although the composition indicates some degree of arrangement, the total effect is natural and unaffected. The youthful huntress wears a placid expression; that and her simple straw hat and cotton dress contrast sharply with the violence symbolized by her rifle, her holster, and the dead game.



Another view (above) taken at LoLo Hot Springs, which bears Mrs. Stevens highly stylized approach to photography, shows a group of health-seekers partaking of the spring water. Note the details: the woman at the top of the group with the raised cup; the two women immediately below her, one with genteely folded hands and the other wrapped in a shawl; and in the lower left, the two cribbage players.



A few hundred feet from LoLo Hot Springs, Granite Creek flows into the LoLo. Directly above the mouth of the creek arises another hot springs and a number of large granite boulders from which the creek took its name. Long an established resort area, it included a number of camping sites for tents as well as log cabins for Victorians less intent on roughing it.



At Granite Hot Springs, Mrs. Stevens took this study of an unidentified family. The man in the party still wears a woman's hat, suggesting that what had been a moment of fun-loving antics had suddenly settled down for a sober moment for her camera.



During one of their excursions, Mrs. Stevens and her companions came upon this unidentified group of campers. Mrs Stevens' daughter suggested that the men were part of a group searching for a lost camping party. If so, the antics interrupted for the photograph contrast sharply with their mission.



The Flathead Indian Reservation, about thirty miles north of Missoula, was another favorite spot for photographers. Located in the scenic, narrow Jocko Valley and named after fur trader Jacques Finley, the reservation agency provided countless opportunities for outstanding photographic studies. It was an early Spring day when Mrs. Stevens took this study of Charles W. Lombard, a Missoula dentist and a fellow member of the Missoula Camera Club, taking a picture of a domestic scene.

Even an afternoon at home could present an opportunity for an interesting photographic study. It seems likely that the picture at the right of the entire Stevens family — Albert, Lyman, Marguerite, Myrta and Lucille — was taken by E. W. Phillips in front of the Stevens home on North Second Avenue. Below is a study of a June, 1899, picnic of the Stevens and Charles Lemley families along the banks of Rattlesnake Creek, near Missoula.





Lyman, dressed in a straw hat and Lord Fauntleroy collar for the picnic on Rattlesnake Creek and the only male in the group, was in the same circumstances above when he joined his two sisters for an afternoon hike. Mrs. Stevens entitled this study "Wait a Minute."