

FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHERS
ON THE FRONTIERMontana's Lady Photographic Artists,
1866-1900

On January 20, 1903, the *Helena Daily Independent* announced the death that day of one of the town's "pioneer Christian women," Rhodina B. Bundy. The obituary gave a brief biographical account of Mrs. Bundy's life, including her activities as a wife and housekeeper, a schoolteacher, and an assistant in her husband's photographic studio, and ended with the following editorial comment:

The deceased was beloved by all who knew her, for she always gave a smile and pleasant word to those around her. When very young she united with the church and her life was that of an ideal Christian. Her house was the home of many of the pioneer Christian workers who gave their lives to the upbuilding of civilization and society. A good woman has gone.¹

In this simply-stated tribute, the writer extolled the virtues of Mrs. Bundy's Christian life and ignored her professional accomplishments by categorizing her as a stereotypical "good" western woman of the nineteenth century. This narrow view of Mrs. Bundy denies the wider range of her talents and overlooks her contributions to the photographic documentation of the West.

During the late nineteenth century, there were both professional and amateur female photographers in Montana. At least twenty worked in the gallery trade, either as assistants or as proprietors of their own studios. Like Mrs. Bundy's, their occupations as photographers often were ignored by the census enumerators, and their talents in photography were disregarded in their obituary notices. Many times their only imprint on history is a brief mention in a biographical summary of their husbands' accomplishments. Luckily, examples of some of their work re-

main to remind us of the part that women played in the West's portrayal.

The earliest photographs known to be taken by a female photographer in Montana are those imprinted "M. A. Eckert, Artist." In 1867, Mrs. Mary Eckert opened her Metropolitan Gallery on the corner of Main and Wood Streets in Helena. She advertised her abilities to execute all kinds of photographs, including ambrotypes and melainotypes (tintypes), and cautioned prospective customers that:

... if their picture is not a lovely one, it will be owing entirely to the fact that, the original is not a beauty—and not to be attributed to the camera, or the lack of skill in the artist.²

Mrs. Eckert was a widow who most likely turned to photography as a means of supporting herself after the death of her husband. To compete with other galleries in Helena, she used her skills as a painter to improve her photography, offering customers "Pictures Colored, in Oil and Water Colors."³ As a sideline, the enterprising Mrs. Eckert also gave lessons in piano, guitar, oil painting, and drawing. She succeeded in outlasting many of her early competitors and remained a photographer in Helena for twenty years. At the time of her death in 1888, the *Helena Daily Herald* described Eckert as "one [of] the finest operatives in the art."⁴

Other women sought to earn their livings in Helena during the late nineteenth century as photographic artists. Two sisters, Astrid and Gunnhild Mortenson, professionally known as the Morton Sisters, apparently did not linger long in the community; as of now, but one example of their work is known.⁵ Maud Davis Baker, on the other hand, was a more successful practitioner and many turn-of-the-century portraits bear

1. *Helena Daily Independent*, January 20, 1903.

2. *Helena City Directory*, 1868, p. 127.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

4. *Helena Daily Herald*, May 3, 1888.

5. *Helena City Directory*, 1892, p. 381. That picture, of Frieda Fligelman, is reproduced on p. 85 of this issue of *Montana the Magazine of Western History*.

6. *Helena City Directory*, 1898-1903.

7. *Helena City Directory*, 1899, 1902, 1903.

the imprint of her name. Mrs. Baker, a widow and mother, was the proprietor of a photographic studio on the sixth floor of the Power Block from 1898 to 1903.⁶

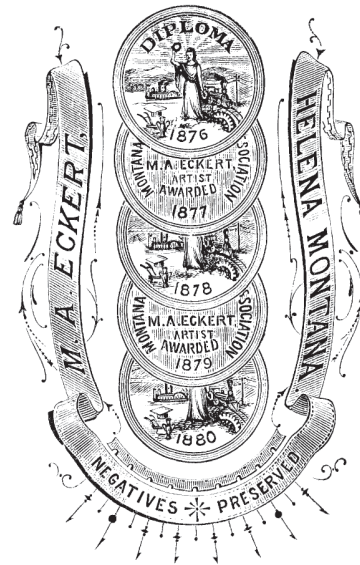
Ada M. Robertson was an assistant in Mrs. Baker's studio for several years and her experiences probably are typical of many women who attempted to make a living as photographers in Montana and other western states. After working as a photographer for the Baker studio, Miss Robertson abandoned photography as a profession and found more dependable employment as a public schoolteacher, a position she held for many years.⁷

Although the practice of photography was full of uncertainties, women did succeed as professional photographers in various Montana towns. The Elite Studio in Butte, for example, had two female proprietors. The first, Mrs. Lydia Brennan, learned the trade from her photographer husband. In 1894-1895 she assisted him in his Butte studio, and then continued to run the business alone. She gave up "an extensive business and a well deserved reputation for high-class photographic art" in December 1896 when she sold the Elite Studio and married Butte lawyer John N. Kirk.⁸ Photographer John Nelson purchased the gallery from Mrs. Brennan and operated it until around 1900, when Mrs. A. G. Gullberg took it over. The Elite Studio remained in its old location at the corner of Park and Main Streets, with its new proprietor promising her customers the latest photographic techniques:

We claim to be the most reliable up-to-date gallery in the Northwest. We can furnish you with Photographs in any size, style or finish, that are being produced. When contemplating having a sitting, bear in mind we guarantee satisfaction in every particular.⁹

Little is known about Mrs. Gullberg or her business except the fact that she ran the studio with the assistance of another photographer, Morton S. McClair, who also acted as manager. The Elite Studio again changed hands about 1904, when Maxwell B. Eyerman became its proprietor.¹⁰

Extant portraiture credited to the Elite Studio in Butte, Montana, survives in photograph collections, but the changing management of the studio in the 1890s makes identifying the work of its female proprietors difficult. Usually, photographs with this studio's imprint are undated and not ascribed to any particular artist. In contrast, portraits taken at the Genelli Studio in Great Falls can be more easily credited to their creator. The gallery was in operation only circa 1896-1897 and had only one known proprietor and photographer, Mrs. Eva Lorillard, whose husband was a music teacher.¹¹



The Eckert logo, as imprinted on the backs of studio photographs.

Women with photographer husbands often receive the least credit for their role in professional photography. They held a position difficult to categorize because it included the duties of wife, mother, and studio helpmate—darkroom assistant, retoucher, and photographer. A woman's position in her husband's studio often changed in response to demands placed on her by both the business and the family.

Phebe Goodell Train was a pioneer woman whose early married life reflected the changing roles of a woman who assisted a photographer husband. She was a young woman of fifteen when she met and married Edgar Train in Idaho City, Idaho. A year later, in 1866, Phebe Train moved with her husband and her parents to Helena, Montana Territory. Soon after settling in the community, Edgar Train purchased the City Photograph Gallery from J. L. Douglas.¹² (The only other photographer in Helena at this time was Mary Eckert.) Mrs. Train worked side by side with her husband in the gallery and also accompanied him on photographing trips to other gold camps. In the fall of 1867, the *Helena Weekly Herald* noted such a journey:

Mr. Train and wife, photograph artists, are in Blackfoot, giving the good people a chance to "secure the shadow, ere the substance fades," an opportunity of which many are availing themselves of. . . .¹³

The following year, the Trains' first child was born and Phebe Train's new responsibilities at home took precedence over out-of-town business. Edgar Train

by Delores J. Morrow

continued to travel, obtaining views of "all places of interest in the Rocky mountains," while Phebe stayed in Helena and ran the studio.¹⁴ Like many photographers' wives, Mrs. Train accepted hand-tinting and retouching work as part of her gallery duties. In the early 1870s, photography studios commonly offered hand-coloring, but the procedure of retouching negatives to remove facial blemishes and wrinkles was fairly new, and worthy of advertising:

The latest invention is one for removing freckles. Mr. Train, of the City Photograph Gallery, does this effectually from his photographs, by an entirely new process. Now is your time, as it works only in cold weather.¹⁵

Phebe Train also shared, with many other photographers' wives, a circumstance that may sometimes have made their roles in the operation of the studio inescapable: studio and home were often at the same location. At first, the Trains' gallery was located on Main Street and they resided at the same location. When a fire in 1868 destroyed their gallery/home, Mr. and Mrs. Train moved their residence to a house on Cutler Street and reestablished their studio on Main Street. In 1874 their downtown studio burned again and they built an addition to their residence on Cutler, operating their gallery there until 1876.¹⁶

Many photographs survive with imprints from the Train studios in Helena, but none is credited to Phebe Train's handiwork as either photographer or hand-coloring and retouching artist. However, the work of her sister-in-law, Rhodina Train Bundy, does survive, documenting that Mrs. Bundy was both photographer and assistant in her husband's photograph studio.

Rhodina B. Train, one of Edgar Train's older sisters, remained in Wisconsin teaching while her brother and her fiancé, Oliver C. Bundy, came west to seek their fortunes. Bundy and Train worked as both miners and photographers in California and Idaho before moving to Helena in 1866. Oliver Bundy then worked in the Schultz and Bundy jewelry store until the winter of 1868-1869 when he returned to Wisconsin to marry Miss Train after a seventeen-year engagement.¹⁷ The new Mrs. Bundy was forty-six years old when she moved to Montana. During her first years in Helena, Mr. Bundy continued in the jewelry store, while Mrs. Bundy's occupation was "keeping

house."¹⁸ The Bundys also helped Edgar and Phebe Train with the operation of their photograph gallery, as the *Helena Daily Herald* announced:

O. C. Bundy is running Train's Photograph Gallery where you can get your shadows taken in any of the latest styles. Has on hand a large assortment of views in Montana and Idaho. Satisfaction is guaranteed. Give the City Gallery a call.¹⁹

In 1872 the Bundys relocated to Virginia City and opened a photograph gallery in rooms previously occupied by photographer A. F. Thrasher.²⁰ In the months that followed, O. C. Bundy produced stereoscopic views of Virginia City that, according to the press, were "equal to the best stereoscopic [sic] pictures of Eastern artists," and were for sale at his gallery.²¹ The popularity of these stereographs encouraged Oliver and Rhodina to travel in search of stereo views, and in May 1872 the Bundys set out on the first of several annual photographic trips around the territory. Virginia City's *Weekly Montanian* noted their departure:

Going.-Mr. and Mrs. Bundy of the Virginia Art Gallery, will leave for Radersburg on Monday next. Mr. Bundy has a photographic car at that place, and after a short stay, will 'harness up his mule,' and visit in detail the principal camps in the Territory. . . . Parties in Virginia will have three days yet in which they can procure his services. 'Secure the shadow ere the artist fades.'²²

In December, Mr. and Mrs. Bundy returned from their tour and reopened their gallery in Virginia City. Yearly thereafter, until 1876, Mrs. Bundy accompanied her husband on four- and five-month photographic expeditions, the success of which largely depended on her ability to share the many gallery chores. Finally, in 1876, the Bundys gave up both touring and their studio in Virginia City. O. C. Bundy bought an interest in the E. H. Train Gallery and he and Rhodina returned to Helena. Mr. and Mrs. Bundy continued to operate this gallery until around 1888, when they retired.²³

Although we know about the work of Phebe Train and Rhodina Bundy, the unattributed roles of many wives who assisted their photographer husbands now

8. Guy X. Piatt, ed., *The Story of Butte* (Butte, Mont.: Standard Manufacturing & Printing Co., 1897), p. 16.

9. *Butte City Directory*, 1900, p. 689.

10. *Ibid.*, 1904, p. 244.

11. *Great Falls Directory*, 1896-97, pp. 103, 191.

12. *Helena Daily Independent*, May 26, 1929.

13. *Helena Weekly Herald*, October 10, 1867.

14. *Helena Daily Herald*, August 29, 1870.

15. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1872.

16. *Helena Daily Independent*, May 26, 1929.

17. *Helena Weekly Herald*, March 25, 1869.

18. U.S. Manuscript Census, 1870, part 1, p. 26.

19. *Helena Daily Herald*, March 3, 1871.

20. *Virginia City Weekly Montanian*, January 4, 1872.

21. *Ibid.*, April 11, 1872.

22. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1872.

23. M. A. Leeson, *History of Montana, 1885* (Chicago: Warner, Beers and Company, 1885), p. 1195; *Helena City Directory*, 1886-87, p. 60; 1888, p. 104.

make it difficult for us to document their careers and to distinguish their photographs from their husbands'. During the years they lived in Montana, neither Mrs. Train nor Mrs. Bundy ever listed their occupations in the censuses or the city directories as retouchers, photographers, or darkroom and gallery assistants. They accepted as their due a modest description, such as that of Mae Doty Culver, the wife of Lewistown photographer William H. Culver: "She helped her husband in the studio work."²⁴

By the turn of the century, women photographers with photographer husbands were more likely to have their occupations listed in the census and, occasionally, in the city directories. Two of the seven Montana women identified as photographers in the 1900 census, Astraid Anderson and Jennie Fullerton, had husbands who were also photographers. Astraid Anderson and her husband, Hans, were Norwegian immigrants working as photographers in Stillwater (later Columbus). Jennie Fullerton and her husband, Robert, operated a photo studio in Great Falls, beginning in 1894.²⁵ Photographs from the Fullertons' gallery still exist, including some with the imprint "Mrs. Fullerton, Great Falls, Mont."

Photographs with the imprint "Sproule Studio, Helena, Mont." exemplify the dilemma of unattributed photographic work by studio assistants, a factor that further complicates research on women photographers. Mrs. Sylvia R. Patrick, a widow and a mother, first worked for George Sproule as an "artist," and then a "retoucher," in 1896-1897.²⁶ At this time, Sproule owned a gallery in partnership with Emil D. Keller. In 1898 George Sproule dissolved his interest in Sproule and Keller, took over the studio of A. Cowan at 14½ South Main, and changed its name to the Sproule Photo Company. Sylvia Patrick then went to work for Mr. Sproule in his new studio—as a photographer. She is listed in the Helena city directories as a photographer at the Sproule studio until 1910, when she married George Sproule. Following their marriage, she continued to assist her husband in the operation of the gallery until his retirement in the mid-1920s.²⁷ Sylvia Patrick Sproule worked for the Sproule studio almost thirty years, yet she receives no credit, as photographer, on this studio's surviving prints. Only the 1900 census and the city directories alert us to her career.

In Montana, the largest and most complete collections of nineteenth-century photographs by women are those left by amateurs rather than professionals. Because these women engaged in photography for their own personal benefit, not a studio's, their work is usually signed, and their photographs reflect a

freedom to choose subjects of individual interest rather than commercial value. In the nineteenth century, professional photographers frequently confined themselves to studio portrait work, while amateurs produced more out-of-door views, usually landscapes. Work survives from several Montana women amateurs of the 1890s, but two in particular, left collections that vividly portray turn-of-the-century Montana.

Evelyn Jephson Cameron first visited Montana in 1889 on a honeymoon and hunting trip in the badlands. Enthusiastic over what they had seen, Evelyn and her husband, Ewen, left England a year later, moved to eastern Montana, and established a ranch. Several financial setbacks, including that brought on by the Panic of 1893, tempted Mr. Cameron to abandon ranching and return to England. But Mrs. Cameron, who wanted to stay, used her ingenuity to augment their ranch income. She took in wealthy Irish and British boarders and raised vegetables for sale to cowboys and other ranchers. She also learned photography from one of her boarders and sold postcards and albums of her photographs. Evelyn Cameron was a writer as well as a part-time photographer, and illustrated her own articles in British magazines. Her primary occupation, however, was ranching and she and her husband raised cattle and fine saddle ponies. They owned several small ranches near Terry, finally settling on a ranch between Fallon and Marsh in 1907. Ewen died in 1915 and Evelyn Cameron continued to manage the ranch until her own death in 1929.²⁸

Despite the invention of flexible film in the late 1880s and the availability of factory processing, Evelyn Cameron used dry plate negatives and processed her own prints. Her views reflect this independence and resourcefulness, as well as the wide range of her interests. Influenced by her naturalist husband's study of Montana birds, Mrs. Cameron photographed all kinds of birds and other wildlife, not a common camera subject at the time. She also photographed the stark beauty of eastern Montana's landscape and recorded the activities and experiences of her friends and neighbors. In her own candid style, Mrs. Cameron sympathetically depicted ranch life on the plains and her own personal involvement with that lifestyle.

Myrta Wright Stevens was a very different person from Evelyn Cameron, but she matched her contemporary in talents and resourcefulness. She moved from Minnesota to Missoula in 1889 to join her hus-

24. *Utica Montana* [by] the Committee (Stanford, Mont.: Judith Basin Press, 1968).

25. *Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Montana Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1894-95, p. 1744.

26. *Helena City Directory*, 1896, p. 337; 1897, p. 321.

27. *Helena Daily Independent*, May 27, 1927; *Helena Independent Record*, July 16, 1948.

28. *Terry Tribune*, January 4, 1929; Prairie County Historical Society, *Wheels Across Montana's Prairie* (Western Printing and Lithography, 1974), pp. 73-74.

THE PROFESSIONALS



M. A. ECKERT: Two 1870s children's portraits taken from 4¼" x 2½" cartes de visite. Lillie Ayers at left is posed formally and dramatically, with the unidentified boy at right in a serious, adult pose. Note the head and back rest visible in lower background behind the boy.

band, Albert, a machinist with the Northern Pacific Railway Company.²⁹ During her first years in western Montana she absorbed herself with her tasks as a wife and mother of three children. Gradually, however, she sought involvements outside the home, becoming an active member of the Rebekah lodge and resuming photography, a hobby she first had taken up in Minnesota.

Through her interest in photography, Myrta Stevens became acquainted with other photographers and joined the Missoula Camera Club. Such photographic societies were very popular in the 1890s and were indicative of the growth of the amateur movement in all parts of the United States. The Missoula Camera Club gave its members opportunities to exchange information and to experiment with different processes and equipment. During the summer months of the 1890s, Myrta Stevens made photographic excursions with the club throughout the countryside, including the Bitterroot Valley, the Coeur d'Alene mining district, and the Flathead Reservation. Her photographs taken on these trips are views, not only of the places visited, but also of the club members setting up their equipment, taking photographs, or simply posing.

Myrta Stevens did not limit her picture-taking to the

forays of the Missoula Camera Club. She loved the outdoors and family outings gave her many occasions to photograph her favorite subjects—family members, scenery, and recreational activities. Her views often are romantic, showing serene landscapes and contented people, but they also are realistic and sometimes humorous. Through her photographs, we see a gayer side to life in the 1890s. Montana was becoming civilized; people had more time for fun and relaxation.

Nineteenth-century Montana women found photography satisfying as both a profession and an artistic form of self-expression. They produced work, in many instances, equal to that of their male counterparts, yet their careers and their photographs largely remain unnoticed. Research into women's involvement in professional photography is complicated by their uncredited studio work, and their unrecorded positions as assistants to photographer husbands. But the work of some female Montana photographers survives both as a testimonial to their careers and as a record of nineteenth-century life. ❧

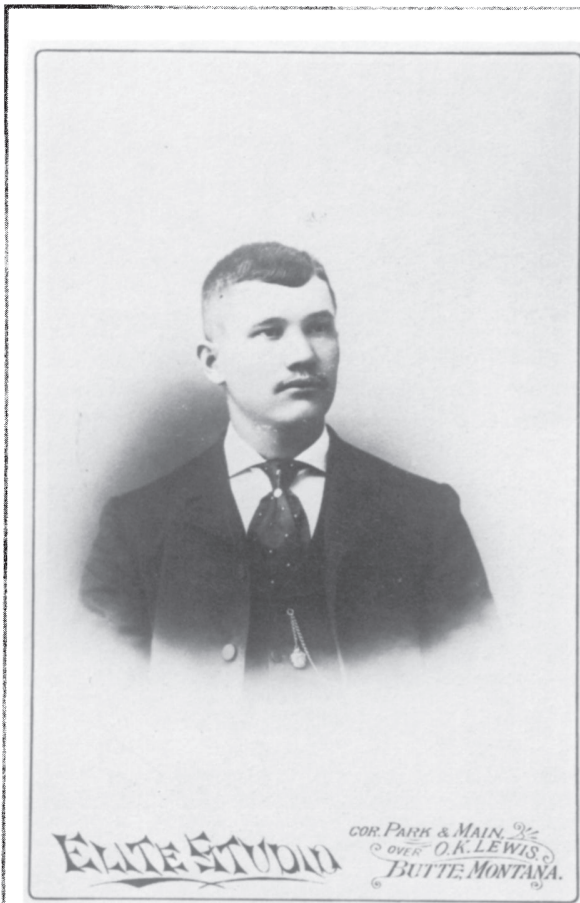
29. H. F. Sanders, *A History of Montana* (Chicago and New York: Lewis Publishing Company, 1913), Vol. III, pp. 1390-1391; "Essay in Photographs: The Artistic Vision of Myrta Wright Stevens," *Montana the Magazine of Western History*, 25 (Summer 1975), pp. 36-37.

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M. A. ECKERT: Pamela Dillin Fergus and husband James (above left), taken from a 6½" x 4½" cabinet photograph. MRS. [JENNIE] FULLERTON: From a cabinet photo (above right) of "Mrs. A. B. Clark's baby," a more relaxed 1890s pose. MRS. O. C. BUNDY: Two 1870s cartes de visite (below), reproduced same size as the originals. The unidentified baby at left looks remarkably relaxed, despite the long exposure times. At right, portrait of James Boyd of Madison County.





MRS. L. L. BRENNAN: Above left, from a circa 1896 cabinet portrait of an unidentified man, demonstrating vignetting technique; above right, Martha Vincent Nichols, December 1896, appears in an unusual horizontal view—probably to display her fashionable dress. Her portrait is credited only to the Elite Studio. **MAUDE DAVIS BAKER:** Below left, a romantic posing of Clara Bullard, daughter of Massena Bullard, from a circa 1900 cabinet photo; below right, from a cabinet photo of Josephine E. Totten, circa 1900, with direct lighting and out-of-focus backdrop making a strong character portrait.



THE AMATEURS



EVELYN J. CAMERON: Above, the photographer herself, circa 1910; at right, a canyon corral on an eastern Montana ranch. Below, J. H. Price and his men branding in eastern Montana; left to right: holding the animal's head is Lance Irvine, with branding iron in hand is J. H. Price, and wearing gauntlets is Thomas Hughes Parry.





MYRTA WRIGHT STEVENS: Above, Mrs. Stevens setting up her camera on a Rattlesnake Creek bridge in the 1890s; at right, a picnic party atop Needle Rock, Lolo Hot Springs, in the 1890s. Below, camping in the Lolo Canyon, also an 1890s scene.

