

# SPECTERS ON GLASS:

STUDIO PORTRAITURE IN EARLY 20TH C. PLACERVILLE

AUGUST 22 - OCTOBER 6, 2024





# SPECTERS ON GLASS

MARYA OSUCHA

The City Photograph Gallery had already passed through many hands when George W. Potter arrived in Placerville from Montana in 1902. We know that he had owned a photographic studio in Montana, as well, but we don't know what exactly drew him to Placerville where, according to the Mountain Democrat, he "decided to cast his lot." Though Potter's is the only studio from which we have existing negatives, his was also the only studio that didn't seem to regularly advertise. G. W. Potter, as he's commonly referred to, operated the City Photograph Gallery until 1910, when he transitioned to a position at the Placerville post office. Potter retired from the Post Office in 1925 and eventually died of pneumonia in 1931 at the age of 83.

During his time as the photographer and owner of the City Photograph Gallery, G. W. Potter took thousands of portraits. All the photographs on display in this exhibition were drawn from a collection of around 1300 glass plate negatives, all thought to have been taken by G. W. Potter. The El Dorado County Historical Museum stewards this collection and has graciously partnered with us in presenting them to the viewing public. Each glass negative has been carefully scanned and archived, then transformed into digital positives. It's from the museum's digitized collection that we have produced the prints you see here.

This trove of glass negatives was found and donated to the museum by the late George Duffey, a member of the Meader Family. The Meader Family has owned the Placerville News Company for four generations and occupies the ground floor of the Shelley Inch Building at 409 Main Street. The negatives that produced the images you now see on our gallery walls were uncovered in the upper stories of the Inch Building, where the City Photograph Gallery is reported to have been located.

Among Potter's portraits, we find a broad range of personalities and personal presentations. Many of these images depict loving relationships between friends and family members. Some of the photographs display incredible tenderness, while yet others are stiff and inscrutable. But they all work together to allow a viewer to acquaint themselves with those who came before, to almost feel as if they are personally interacting with – reaching toward – a specter from Placerville's past.

However, we must be aware that histories of representation are fraught with conflict. Before it was considered as an art form, photography was seen as a marriage of science and craft. The medium was often used by those in power to survey, document, and control those who they wished to dominate. Even though the nuanced story behind each of the images included in this exhibition is out of our reach, it's important that while we enjoy them, we also view them with a critical eye turned toward the past.

We must acknowledge that at times the photographic medium was used as a tool in the painful history of racism. Because of the sparseness of existing research materials, we cannot say for certain if any of the images included in our exhibition are a direct result of this, but we also cannot say that they are not. So, it is crucial that we recognize the possibility that some of these images may not have been commissioned by the sitter and may, instead, have been commissioned by a person who was documenting the sitter as a subject to be studied or controlled.

We as viewers need also to acknowledge that many of the folks pictured in this exhibition descend from families, or are themselves a person, who relocated to California during the Gold Rush only to displace or even cause bodily harm to communities who were already thriving in this region. While yet other portraits picture enduring survivors of that tumultuous era.

With respect, we acknowledge that these photographs were taken on, and that we are currently on, the traditional and unceded land of the Nisenan and Miwok peoples. Arts and Culture El Dorado commits to an ongoing relationship with local tribal communities, the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians and their community, and to respect the legacy of the first peoples of this land and their future generations who are an integral part of this community.

Bearing all this in mind, we hope you enjoy wandering through the gallery, reaching into the past to briefly glimpse an apparition of life in Placerville circa 1905. We relied on the County Archives and the online Newspaper Archives to extract what information we could about pictured here. In many cases, we found nothing. The only available echo of their being is their photograph. Where we were able to find reliable information, we have included it here in the catalog and in the exhibition.

With access to only a few primary documents (letters or journals or extensive newspaper articles), we're left with host of questions: How intimate was the studio setting? Did the sitters feel comfortable enough therein to bare a hidden truth about themselves? Were the photographs intended for private viewing or for more public consumption? What would it have taken for folks to travel to the portrait studio from outlying areas and homesteads? These questions remain unanswered, but as you move through the exhibition, notice your imagination finding answers for you.

## A Note From the Archivist

Mary Cory, Museum Administrator, El Dorado County Historical Museum

These historical images, on display for the first time as a group, are from the El Dorado County Historical Museum's photograph collection. Donated to the Museum over 30 years ago, each picture captures a moment in time and gives a glimpse of the people who were in Placerville in the early 20th century.

Today, we are so used to the idea of taking digital pictures with various handheld devices and then have the immediate gratification of seeing that image on the screen. It's easy to forget that until recently, photography required a great deal of patience. Film in most cameras had to be developed before seeing the results. Even earlier, photographers took pictures with cameras mounted on a tripod, using specially treated plates. Quite a contrast to today's habit of snapping hundreds of digital photos and seeing the results right away.

These historical photographs can provide a wealth of information about the times they were taken. If the sitter can be identified, we can sometimes surmise why they might have had their photograph taken at that particular time, such as recording a beloved daughter through the first three years of her life. The clothes and hats worn by the sitters can tell us about the fashions of the day, and we can sometimes find family information in the archives that helps to fill out the story of their lives.

The El Dorado County Historical Museum has a collection of over 27,000 images from El Dorado County that have been digitized. Since the Museum opened in 1974, photographs, as well as artifacts, maps, documents, and other historical material have been donated, helping to fulfill its mission to preserve and present El Dorado County's history. Visit the County Museum's website for more information at [www.eldoradocounty.ca.gov](http://www.eldoradocounty.ca.gov) and follow the links to the Museum's page.



All photos courtesy of El Dorado County Historical Museum.

View of Main Street Placerville, c.1905



"Mrs. Mary Anderson." December 2, 1902.



"Mrs. J. Meader." No date.

Note: When a title is in quotations, it is replicating ink lettering that was found to be written on the original glass negative



Katie and Mary Brazil.  
June 20, 1906.

Katie Rose and Mary Brazil were married to the Guidici Brothers and were reported to be “well-known young people of Georgetown.”



“Bamber and Cole.”  
August 16, 1906.

Possibly Ira Bamber and Albert Cole who were associated with Cole’s Station on the railroad.



"Shelley Inch, son, and grandson." No date.

Shelley Inch owned the building at 409 Main St., now Placerville News. He is credited with adding the second story and cast iron front in 1898. All three pictured were named Shelley.



"Cerri." No Date.



"Miss Rosenferger." No date.



"Coval." December 15, 1906.

Of the large Coval Family that resided in Shingle Springs on Ponderosa Rd.





"Helen Fox." No Date



"Mrs. Bergala." June 22, 1903.

The listed name most likely belongs to the person who commissioned the photograph, but no information of a little girl in relation to the Bergala Family.



Charles Frazier. January 20, 1906.

Machinist for Taylor Mine, locate 2 mi. from Garden Valley. The pictured machine could be a model of a mining winch. The photo was perhaps taken for a patent application.



"Dick." Date unknown.

According to local historians, there was a large Chinese business district on Benham and Pacific Streets. However, in 1855 a law was passed raising the "foreign miners tax" from \$4.00 to \$6.00 per month, with an annual increase of \$2.00 per month. On October 20, 1855 The Mountain Democrat reported that "[...] the Chinese are unable to pay the new tax and are leaving the county in scores."



"Rabbiosi Bros. and Angelo Zagioni." February 10, 1908.



"A. Roberge." June 28, 1904.

The Roberge property boasted a valuable sulphide deposit and was sold to the Standard Oil company.



Mother with Children.  
Date Unknown.

"Frank Hart and the  
Morton Sisters." ca.  
1904.





"G. B. Jurgens." November 15, 1904.

George B. Jurgens was linked to an established mining family in Rescue. Perhaps he commissioned the photo?



"J. G. Sutton." February 27, 1906.





"Mr. E. Bloch." May 12, 1906.

Residents of San Francisco but frequently travelled to Placerville to visit the A. Mierson Family. This photograph was taken less than one month following the San Francisco earthquake and fire.



"M. Swygert." c. 1905.

Thought to be a photo of Jennie Swygert and her daughter Odessa.



"J . R. Vandergrift." February 27, 1906.

One of those pictured is Daisy Vandergrift, who died only four years later at the age of 13.



"Mrs. Jas Nye." July 4, 1903.

Mrs. Jas Nye is listed as a census marshal in 1906.



"Wot Chung."

In 1914, Wot Chung is listed among those who donated money to aid those suffering from starvation in WWI Belgium.

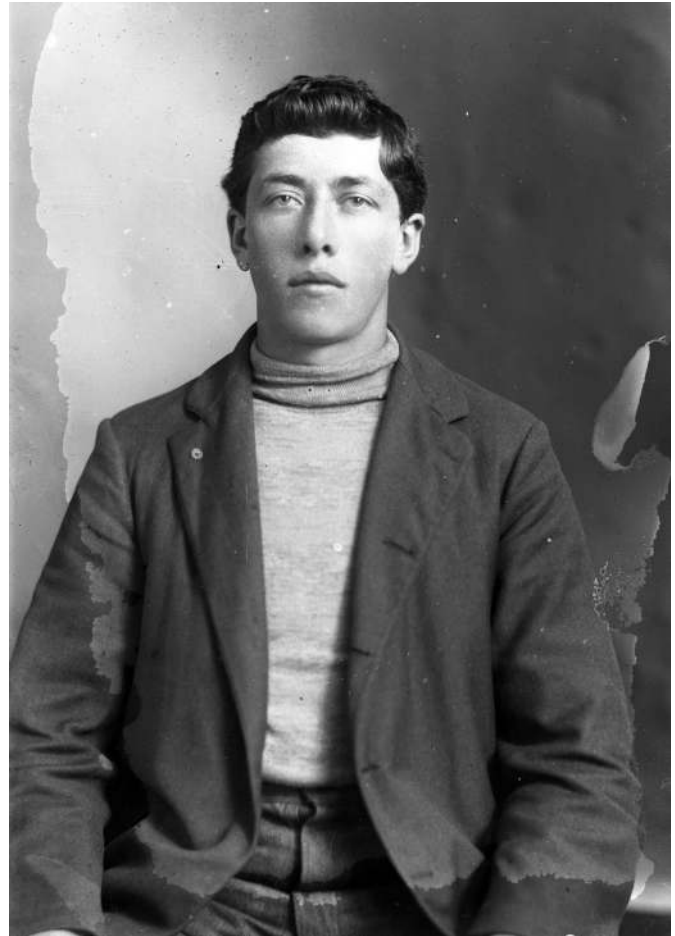


Grace Davis Reiber. c. 1905.



"Abbie Jukes." January 20, 1907.

Named for her grandfather's sailing vessel, the Abeona, on which he sailed from England to North America. She and her husband were "engaged in farming" in Grizzly Flats.



"Gugnoui." March 29, 1907.



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Inside Front Cover- Main Street 1912  
Inside Back Cover- G.W. Potter 1908

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