

Animal knickknacks

odd items from the 19th century photographic press

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One of my particular (and, some would say, peculiar) pleasures is to read 19th century photographic periodicals, page by page, volume by volume. Xeroxing with gay abandon, I feed my files with hundreds of items on personalities, processes and photographic topics. Equally important, I gain a sense of the issues which actually engaged the minds of the Victorian photographer, which were very different from the issues with which later historians have told us they *should* have concerned themselves. A striking difference between the actuality and the present perception of the 19th century photographer, to take only one example, is the sense of wonder and a whacky sense of humor which pervades the pages of the early journals.

The Victorian age is usually characterized by its moral rectitude, earnestness, dour temperance and solemnity. But the Victorian spirit was also marked by optimism, self-assurance and, most beguiling of all, a delight in laughing at itself - and the medium. The 19 century photographic press is suffused with puns, riddles and jokes, as well as bizarre tales and weird and wonderful events. These items defy categorization so I merely drop them in files marked "knickknacks." Of course I hope that one or two of them may, one day, enliven a lecture or article; I also hope that a reader of this article can find a use for one of these stories.

Here is a brief sampling of knickknacks in celebration of animals:

1.

It seems that Mr. J. J. Davis, of Findlay, Ohio, went out to feed his cow last year. When he left the house, he had a photograph in his pocket, but when he returned he discovered that it had disappeared. He made a long and anxious search for it, but could not find it. Recently the cow gave birth to a calf, and on the left side of the calf's neck is a hairless spot about six inches square. In the centre of the spot is a capital likeness of Mr. Davis, and that gentlemen is of opinion that he must have dropped the photograph into the food that he gave the cow on the occasion above mentioned, and she had eaten it. In some way, known only to the mysterious laws of nature, the photograph made an impression on the

unborn calf. A number of Mr. J. J. Davis 's friends have seen the calf in question, and they all corroborate his story.

The Photographic Review of Reviews , April 1895, p.136.

2.

J.P. Sullivan, of Salina, Kan., has a horse in whose right eye there is a photograph of his wife. He is offered \$500 for the animal, but refuses to sell it. The photo is a perfect likeness. Mrs. Sullivan stood in front of the horse during an electrical storm, and veterinary surgeons attribute to this fact the photo coming in the horse's eye. Its sight is not affected.

From the St. Louis and Canadian Photographer. Reprinted in The British Journal of Photography, 3 August 1900, p. 494.

3.

One day we shot a ten-foot alligator, and immortalised him, photographically speaking, by taking his picture in all sorts of positions. One represents him with a strap around his neck and a cord attached, the cord being held by the young lady of the party, who was equal to the emergency and dressed up, with bonnet, gloves, and parasol, and is apparently taking the 'gator out for a little exercise. The picture will be called The Florida Poodle.

"Photographic Experiences in Florida", by Marcus H. Rogers. Reprinted from Anthony's Bulletin in The British Journal of Photography, 18 June 1886, p. 389.

4.

Photographic stands constructed with stuffed kittens appear to be increasingly popular. It has been estimated that nine millions of kittens are born annually - an estimate we should regard as, if anything, under the mark. Mr. Spicer, of Birmingham, has built up quite an industry in the utilisation of this frequently unwelcome and certainly unnecessary addition to the cat world. After a careful observation of the habits and peculiarities of kittens, he can now skilfully stuff them into most life-like attitudes; and the demand for his work is, he says, practically unlimited.

The Amateur Photographer, 19 November 1886, p. 243.

5.

A melancholy accident, in which photography was indirectly concerned, occurred near Luton last week. An amateur was about to take a photograph of a pet stag when it furiously attacked its owner. Although the artist made a vigorous attempt to beat the infuriated animal off with his camera stand, the brute inflicted such injuries upon his unfortunate proprietor that he died almost immediately.

Possibly, had the camera stand been of the substantial character of those in vogue a few years back, the encounter would have had a different termination. The British Journal of Photography, 10 August 1888, p. 499.

6.

The amateur was in England. He had focussed upon a picturesque cottage, when a cur ran out, barking at him. In his fright he seized his tripod and ran one of the pointed legs thereof through the body of the dog. The yelps of the wounded brute brought out the owner of the cottage, who, seeing what happened, cried out, "Oh dearie me! Why didn't you come at 'im with the hother hend?" Amateur: "Why in thunder didn't 'e come hat me with 'is hother hend?" Now, upon that house is inscribed "Warning! Photographers and other tramps are strongly forbidden to photograph this cottage."

From the Philadelphia Photographer. Reprinted in The Photographic News, 11 May 1888, p. 304.

7.

Sympsycho-graphy - we have carefully gone through the letters of this word and find them correct - is the latest thing in photography. A Mr. Jordan, who has been looked upon, up to the present, as a serious person - he is, it is stated, a professor at an American University - has invented a camera with "seven facets." He places opposite each of these facets a man who has sworn, by all he holds dear, to think of a cat - not one particular cat, but an abstract cat - not a lodging-house feline, which may be called an abstract, but an ordinary cat. Somehow or other, in the inside of the camera the impressions received are coalesced and the resulting photograph is "a collective psychical image which is none other than the astral cat in its real essence." Mr. Jordan's next step is to induce seven docile cats to seat themselves opposite the different lenses and think of a man - not the cat's-meat man or their master, but an ordinary abstract man - and he, Mr. Jordan hopes, should there be no diversion, as mice or rats, to produce "the photograph of man in his real essence as conceived by cat."

The Amateur Photographer, 23 October 1896, editorial.

8.

Lightning-prints are appearances sometimes found on the skin of men or animals that are struck by lightning, and are currently believed to be photographic representations of surrounding objects or scenery.

At Candelaria, in Cuba, in 1828, a young man was struck dead by lightning near a house, on one of the windows of which was nailed a horse-shoe; and the image of the horseshoe was said to be distinctly printed upon the neck of the

young man. On the 14th of November, 1830, lightning struck the Chateau Benatoniere, in Lavendee. At the time a lady happened to be seated on a chair in the salon, and on the back of her dress were printed minutely the ornaments on the back of the chair. In September, 1857, a peasant-girl, while herding a cow in the department of Seine-et-Marne, was overtaken by a thunder-storm. She took refuge under a tree, the cow and herself were struck with lightning. The cow was killed, but she recovered, and on loosening her dress for the sake of respiring freely, she saw a picture of the cow upon her breast.

Lightning-prints, or the phenomenon of keraunography, was a fairly common subject in the 19th century photographic press. This item appeared in Handbook of Curious Information.

9.

It seems that Mr. Von Sothen, who resides on the other side of the Atlantic, wished to slaughter a worn-out mule, and he concluded to blow off the animal's head with dynamite. In the circuit which fired the charge was included an electric release for an extremely rapid shutter, the camera to which this was attached being focussed on the doomed animal. The result of this ingenious arrangement was a picture of a headless mule with a jet of blood spurting from its neck, and even the rope with which the animal, had been tied stood bolt upright, not having had time to fall.

The Photographic News, 26 August 1881, p. 408.

10.

It is to be hoped that the accident - not by any means so severe as at first reported - to Mdlle. Seinde will deter others from being photographed in such a hazardous position as that chosen by the lady, namely, with her head in the mouth of a lion. Such a task must be rough, both on the photographer and the lion, and probably the two were equally frightened at the appearance of each other. Any way, the photographer might well be excused if he were a little nervous in the presence of a lion while the latter, fatigued at holding his jaws so long in one position, is to be pardoned if his muscles relaxed, and his teeth came in contact with the head of the fool hardy lady. There are two reasons put forward as to why the animal closed his month suddenly. One is that he was startled by the magnesium flash, and the other that his fright was caused by the voice of the lady calling out to the photographer to make haste. However, it does not matter much which theory is correct. What is more important is, did the photographer get his negative?

The Photographic News, 10 February 1888, p. 89.

11.

The London Stereoscopic Company, Cheapside, E.C. are now publishing photographs of a "toad" discovered by Mr. W.J. Clarke, Rugby, in the center of a lump of coal, after having been on the fire about an hour and a half. Mr. Clarke broke the coal with a poker, and noticing something moving, he picked it up, and found it was a living toad. It had no mouth, and was nearly transparent. It lived five weeks after being liberated, and has been on view in Cheapside.

American Amateur Photographer, Vol. XIII, 1901.

12.

A somewhat "fishy" story reaches us. It is stated that an individual - in whose ideas the scientific evidently takes precedence of the utilitarian - has succeeded in producing a photograph by the light emitted by a putrid haddock! We have heard it argued that there is a use for everything in nature; but surely this is the first application that has been discovered for "stinking fish," when it is too far gone to be used as manure. Possibly, however, we have here the germs of some great discovery which in the dim future may enable us to utilise the hitherto wasted light that is produced by decaying animal matter. Meanwhile, we are informed by a gentleman who had the privilege of examining this curious production, that it was "difficult to discover what it was intended to represent."

The British Journal of Photography, 7 April 1888, p.185

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