

Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

Family albums showcase late-19th century photography

By Gabrielle Allard

The arrival of amateur photography in the late-19th century forever changed the documentation of everyday life, providing an outlet for expression and capturing memories.

The first introduction of photography occurred in 1816 by French inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833). In the 1820s, he used a primitive camera to produce the oldest surviving photograph.

The first photographic camera that was available for consumer use was the daguerreotype camera. In 1839, this camera took five to 30 minutes for exposure. The photographic process during this time was complex and tedious, often requiring a professional photographer.

In 1888, George Eastman released the Kodak camera, a transformative piece of equipment. It was a box camera with features such as a fixed-focus lens and single shutter speed.

This model offered the availability of pre-loaded film, 100 exposures. The Eastman Kodak Co. advertising slogan was, "You click the button, we do the rest," making photography accessible to amateurs. Consumers mailed the camera to Kodak, where the film was processed, and then returned with a new roll of film. This process was an additional \$10.

The Kodak Co. made photography more accessible, at a cost of \$25 for the camera.

Prior to the 1880s, professional portraits were customary and it was often the case that only one or two portraits were taken of a person in their lifetime.

Two family albums, in the



THIS PHOTO, TITLED "Couple in Corn," was taken by Frank Kingsbury and is part of the Ripon Historical Society archives.

Ripon Historical Society's collection, are examples of late-19th century amateur photography. The two families are the Dornbrooks and the Kingsburys. The photographs in these albums give a glimpse into the photographer's creativity, with their subjects in much less formal settings.

Both albums are filled with moments that showcase how the families lived. Many children are featured exploring their surroundings, being held by family members or playing with animals.

They include multiple staged photographs, some romantic (see "Couple in Corn" photo by Frank Kingsbury), and some humorous. For example, in the Kingsbury album, there is a photograph of a group of young men titled "Played Out." They are seated at a table and appear to be smoking and drinking. Kingsbury (1859-1934), likely staged a moment where the subjects appear to be passed out from drinking, an activity likely frowned upon during that time. The sub-

jects and photographer clearly thought it was funny to pretend and bend the rules.

The Dornbrook album features more portraits in comparison to Kingsbury's. Each photograph is set in a unique location with the subject doing something of interest to them. One photograph is of Nellie Colton Simmons (1888-1956), whose sister, Gyda, married a Dornbrook. She is photographed against a curtain backdrop intently reading her book. From this photograph it could be speculated that she enjoyed reading, an interest she wanted to be documented for the family's album.

Another Dornbrook family photograph features Gyda Colton Dornbrook holding the camera that was likely used to take the collection of photographs.

One could speculate that Gyda owned the camera and may have taken the photograph of her sister, Nellie.

Photography in the late 1880s had improved, but still had pitfalls. The first being long exposure times. Early-made cameras required the subject to stand rooted from the span of a few seconds to several minutes to improve the quality of the photograph.

The limitations that presented themselves before photography evolved were capturing motion, adjusting quickly to light sources and taking multiple photos in quick succession. Advancements in these areas enable for the candid, natural pictures that society takes for granted today.

Now, many amateur photographers use smartphones, which have the power to take a burst of photos, edit extensively, filter the photographs and share to the world with a click of a button. Amateur photography has been incorporated



NELLIE COLTON SIMMONS intently reads her book in a photo that is part of the Dornbrook album.



GYDA COLTON DORNBROOK holds a camera that likely was used to take several of the photos in the Dornbrook album.



THE DORNBROOK ALBUM features a photo titled "Played Out," which show four men passed out at table.

into social media to tell stories about our lives and interests.

In the late 1800s, amateur photographers had to do a bit of planning and staging to convey their sense of humor or their interests and hobbies.

Just as with amateur photography today, late-19th century photography emphasized self-expression, creativity.

The Dornbrook and Kingsbury albums of the 1880s showcase a sense of creative individuality because the photographs share what the photographer wished to be represented.

These family albums were curated, with each photograph being selected to tell a story, while people today generate thousands of digital images taking away the selecting sig-

nificance.

No matter the technology behind the camera, photographs are a window into how people wish to present themselves.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, [facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety/](https://www.facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety/) or [instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/](https://www.instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/).

Editors note: This is the second of three Now & Then in Ripon articles written by Ripon College students interning last semester with the Ripon Historical Society. Allard is a junior.