

EVERYTHING PHOTOGRAPHIC

J.T. BOYSEN AND HIS YOSEMITE STUDIO

Dizzying cliffs, roaring waterfalls and unparalleled rock formations make Yosemite National Park one of the most photographed places on earth today. But at the dawn of the twentieth century, when tourists were still making their way into the Valley via horse and stagecoach, photography and vacation snapshots were still a luxurious rarity.

Into this void stepped Yosemite entrepreneur and photographer Julius Theodore Boysen. Along with his wife Mabel, Boysen ran a successful photography business in Yosemite Valley for over 40 years. They offered thousands of tourists the chance to record their visits with a portrait by park landmarks, and sold many more postcards of Yosemite's wonders, spreading the park's fame around the world.

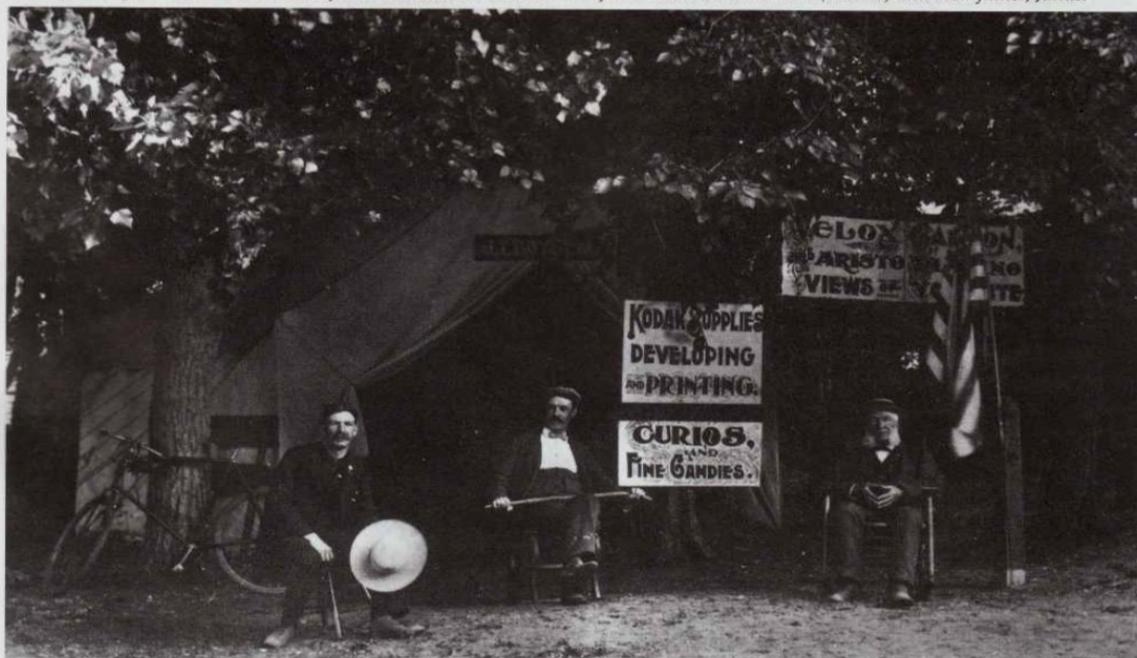
Boysen is not one of Yosemite's best remembered photographers, nor was he particularly prolific. Even so, he left behind a legacy of unique Yosemite images chronicling life in the park during a time of rapid social and

technological change. His historic photographs include images of the Stanley Steamer automobile that entered the park in July 1900, the 1909 visit of President Taft and a 1906 series of Galen Clark in Mariposa Grove.

J.T. Boysen, as he is often known, was born in San Francisco on December 18, 1868. His father, Julius Boysen, was a German immigrant who arrived in San Francisco in 1855. As a "hatter," the elder Boysen's business must have thrived in stylish nineteenth-century San Francisco.

Julius married a Swedish woman named Engla Rosenlof on November 20, 1859, in San Francisco. They had three children before she died from tuberculosis in 1865. Burdened with the care of three young children and a business, he quickly found another wife. Julia Lind, also from Sweden, was in her twenties when they married in 1866 or 1867. The birth of Julius T. Boysen soon followed. But the boy lost his mother in 1880, when he was just eleven years old.

J.T. Boysen (left), at the entrance to his first tent studio in Yosemite Valley with his brother Edward (middle) and their father, Julius.



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A prominent sign attracted visitors entering the Old Village to Boysen's studio. The former Sentinel Hotel can be seen in the distance next to Sentinel Bridge.

By the time J.T. Boysen turned 21, he had moved to the Sierra Nevada foothills. He lived with, and probably worked for, Joseph Rydberg, an indirect relative who owned a ranch in Cooperstown about 20 miles west of Sonora. There he spent about six years working on ranches and farms in Stanislaus and Tuolumne counties.

Boysen then left the foothills and moved to Yosemite. Little did he imagine that it would be the beginning of a 43-year association with Yosemite, from 1898 to 1943.

Young and strong, Boysen performed trail work for the first few years. But in 1895, he tried to follow in his father's entrepreneurial footsteps, asking the Yosemite Commissioners for a permit to operate Snow's abandoned hotel near the base of Nevada Fall. The commission turned his request down. Undaunted, Boysen applied for "a curio and souvenir shop and photo privileges of groups with a 4 by 5 camera" on May 8, 1897. This time, he was successful. In 1898, Boysen opened a tent studio on the site of Gustavus Fagersteen's former photography studio, located in what is now called the Old Village.

The Boysen Studio was considered a "general photographic business" by the National Park Service. The permits allowed dealings in "everything photographic," including processing film, selling cameras, film, photographs, postcards and "Yosemite paintings in water or oil colors." He took portraits of tourists at sites around the Valley and sold visitors prints and postcards of waterfalls and other landmarks. Boysen rounded out his offerings

with fine candies and even Indian baskets, but the latter were removed from his permit in 1915.

When J. T. Boysen became interested in photography or how he learned to process film is unknown. Whatever his motivations, his photography business proved successful. Good luck and good timing also played a role. In 1900, just as Boysen was starting his business, Kodak unveiled its Brownie camera. Simple to use and affordable at just a dollar, the Brownie brought photography to the masses for the first time.

The Brownie's popularity created business opportunities for Boysen and many others in the nascent field of photography. At this time, Boysen wisely made his studio an Eastman Kodak agency. He could not only sell Kodak film and cameras to Yosemite visitors, but also develop and print their photos while they were still vacationing in the park.

Also in 1900, Boysen moved his business from a tent to a wooden building. The shift was part of a state policy to rid Yosemite of temporary structures. The studio he constructed was modest, just 16 x 34 feet.

By 1913, Boysen could proudly report to Park Superintendent Major Littebrant that he was "the first to introduce developing and printing for amateurs; the first to carry a line of Photographic Supplies for sale and the first to introduce the photographing of people reflected at Mirror Lake and also on horseback at trails, free of charge, to buy or not, at their option, after seeing the

proofs at the studio." If that was not enough, his was "the only studio kept open during the winter."

As these statements suggest, Boysen's was not the only photographic studio in the Valley. His competitors included photographers Arthur C. Pillsbury, D. J. Foley, and Harry C. Best. And while Boysen was generally cooperative in his dealings with park managers and the other concessionaires, the presence of so many studios inevitably caused tensions. For example, each day all of the studios would set up cameras around Mirror Lake to photograph visitors. In 1916, A. C. Pillsbury proposed the studios alternate their days at the lake instead. First tried during the 1915 season, the arrangement frustrated Boysen. "Many mornings, for some reason, either or both of my competitors failed to be there," he wrote in a letter to the park. When the park supervisor instructed the studios to continue the alternating-day plan, Boysen complained in a second letter. "I abhor these controversies, and have no intention to be arbitrary, and am seeking no special privileges [sic], but endeavoring to defend my business interests."

Photography would provide Boysen a career as well as a family. In 1899, Mabel Sweetland, a native of the San Joaquin Valley hamlet of Lemoore, was working as a teacher in San Francisco. She happened to visit Yosemite Valley that summer with two of her students. She met J.T. when she took her film to be processed at Boysen's Studio. After a brief romance, the pair were married in Lemoore on February 11, 1900. On November 6, 1900, their only child, Ellen, was born in Lemoore.

Mrs. Boysen became a true partner in the photography business. Among other work around the studio, she was a "saleslady and colorist" who hand-tinted photographs that the studio framed and sold.

Julius T. and Mabel Boysen, almost certainly taken on the occasion of their wedding in Lemoore in 1900.



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Mabel Boysen had an unusually close relationship with many Native Americans who lived in the Valley. In a 1934 interview, she recalled that she "would have been very lonely when I came here if it had not been for the Indians. They were good to me and there were often several of them sitting around the rooms of my house."

In addition to selling baskets until 1915, the Boysens amassed a substantial personal collection, part of which is now in the Yosemite Museum collection. Mabel Boysen was also a judge in the basket competition at some of the Indian Field Days held in the Valley from 1916 to 1930.

The Boysens' unusually close association with Native Americans would lead to some of J. T. Boysen's most significant images. He took a number of portraits of Yosemite's native people, including a 1901 photo of Paiute Indian Suzie McGowan carrying her daughter Sadie in a beaded cradleboard.

Despite his professional success, Boysen suffered from serious health problems that affected his work. As early as 1919, Mabel Boysen and her father contacted a former employee about buying the studio. And in June 1920, 51-year-old Boysen himself wrote to Superintendent Lewis stating his "desire to dispose of the photographic business in Yosemite known as the Boysen Studio." Nothing came of this, because in September 1920, J.T. applied again for his annual permit, asking that it "be made in favor of Mrs. and Mr. J. T. Boysen instead of J. T. Boysen" because his "sickness, last summer, compelled her assuming the management exclusively and in every sense she is an equal partner."

In 1924, the Park Service began moving businesses like Boysen's Studio to the north side of the Valley to the present location of Yosemite Village. By that December, the Park Service had a plan and elevation for Boysen's so-called New Village studio designed by Herbert Maier. The building, wrote Park Superintendent W.B. Lewis, would be "a frame structure with shake roof, sided with bark, and with stone foundation."

After some construction delays due to his health, Boysen moved into the structure in the spring of 1926. The "new" Boysen Studio still exists just west of the Post Office; it is now the NPS Wilderness Center where visitors can obtain permits for backcountry camping, climbing and other activities.

But health issues continued to plague Boysen. In 1934, the Boysens wrote to the NPS Director asking that their contract be changed to



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This image of Suzie McGowan and her daughter Sadie near Yosemite Falls was one of several photos Boysen took documenting the lives of Native Americans in the park.

state that in the event of either of their deaths, the business would revert not to the government but the remaining partner instead. The letter states that "Mr. Boysen has had a complete nervous break-down, and the possibility of a paralytic stroke is imminent. After the forced move to the New Village Mrs. Boysen's personal capital was put into the business, in the effort to hold it together. The result of the above facts is that now, at the age of fifty eight, this business is Mrs. Boysen's only means of livelihood."

The nation was now in the throes of the Great Depression, which was bad news for businesses connected to tourism such as Boysen's Studio. In 1934, the park superintendent wrote to the NPS Director stating that "the photographic business seems to be growing progressively worse. There appears to be a diminution in the percentage of people who are having their developing work done in the Park—the outlook is altogether dis-

couraging." He asked the Director to defer the franchise payment for the Boysens as the NPS had already done for Mr. Foley.

When the Boysens wrote to request the renewal of their concession in 1934, they asked that their married daughter, Ellen, be included on the contract, stating that "Mrs. St. Clair has lived here most of her life and has managed the business for the past five years."

After so many years in poor health, J.T. finally became an invalid about 1934. In March of 1939, Mabel Boysen took him to a sanitarium in Sacramento, where he died on May 29 at the age of 70. Following a Masonic funeral on June 1, his remains were buried in the Masonic Cemetery in Mariposa.

Acting NPS Director Arthur Demaray wrote to Mabel Boysen offering "the deepest sympathies" of the National Park Service. "Although Mr. Boysen was not well the last few years of his life and he could not do the things he wanted, his pictures and the things he did in the early days of the park will long be remembered. The way you carried on for him should always be a consolation to you."

Mabel Boysen operated the business and continued to live in Yosemite Valley until her sudden death from a heart attack on May 10, 1943. Her funeral was conducted in Mariposa by the Order of the Eastern Star on May 13. She was buried beside her husband. Superintendent and Mrs. Frank Kittredge led a group of at least seventeen people from Yosemite Valley who attended the funeral.

In August, Ellen sold the family business including the "buildings, personal property, equipment, inventories of merchandise for resale, inventories of supplies, and operating rights of and to the photographic studio and personal living quarters of the business" to the Yosemite Park and Curry Company for \$7,000. The company continued to run the business as the Boysen Studio until 1947, when the NPS recommended renaming it to avoid misleading the public. The name change marked the end of a familiar Valley landmark and an institution that helped record a bygone era in Yosemite history.

A native of Fresno, Steve Harrison vacationed in Yosemite often while growing up. He recently retired after 30 years with the National Park Service. He and his wife Donna now make their home in western North Carolina but try to visit Yosemite at least once a year.