

Carroll Yesteryears
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Photographer's Legacy Lies in the Photos He Left Behind
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

If you are in Westminster and have time to spare, please stop at the Historical Society of Carroll County to see a small new exhibit in the library at 210 East Main Street. Melvin Starner's display offers history enthusiasts an opportunity to see photographs of people, places, and things taken over 100 years ago by Pleasant Valley photographer Hollie H. Helwig.

Hollie Helwig (1880-1961) spent much of his life in his hometown. His studio was in his home on the main street, but he also carried his camera around the area during the first decades of the 1900s, capturing friends and neighbors at family reunions, on their farms, posing with their livestock, and even in their automobiles.

No small-town photographer could make a living without other jobs to supplement his income. Helwig also earned money as a carpenter and paperhanger, occupations he mentioned in his advertisements. He competed for business with two other photographers living nearby. History doesn't tell us which houses or chicken coops he built or where he hung wallpaper. Instead, his legacy lies in the many photographs he left behind.

He married a local girl, Emma Koontz, with whom he had two sons. After his death and that of sons Edmund and Leroy, a later generation inherited what remained of his photography business. Melvin Starner stepped in to preserve Helwig's fragile glass plate negatives by digitizing them. Shirley Brown and others who knew Pleasant Valley's older generation of residents tried to identify as many people and places as possible from a large box of prints. The exhibit includes only a fraction of what Helwig left, but after seeing it, you might wish he had captured your ancestors in one of his pictures.

If you are like most of us today, you use a cellphone to take photos. Perhaps you have them professionally taken for graduations, weddings, or formal portraits, but otherwise you whip out your phone to snap pictures, then grab it again to share them with others. Few of us are aware of how Helwig and other photographers of his era went about their business, lugging heavy cameras, stands, and boxes of glass plate negatives along with that distinctive black cloth they draped over themselves and the camera. The job wasn't quite so tricky when a customer posed in a studio.

The method Hollie Helwig used involved dry glass plates, likely purchased already prepared, which were inserted in a slot in the back of his large camera. It was a commonly-used technique by the 1880s and replaced wet-plate photography. Helwig's favorite plates were 5"x7". One side of the glass was covered with a light-sensitive emulsion which meant they needed to be handled in the dark. He probably took multiple images of every subject and used multiple plates in the hopes his subjects were standing still or smiling nicely. Back home, in a darkroom, he developed the plates, decided which one had the best image, then printed it on photographic paper, just as

prints are made today. He likely stamped the back with his name and address, then slipped the print into a cardboard frame and handed it to his customer.

One of the advantages of glass plate photography was the amount of detail it captured. It was superior to roll film and Brownie cameras which became popular later. Anyone discovering old glass plate negatives in good condition in their basement or attic today is in for a real treat when the images are printed. For historians they are invaluable! The delicate lace on a woman's collar, the fine wrinkles on an elderly face—everything is preserved. Color images were not possible with the technique although hand-tinting of the final photo was an option. There were a few downsides. The glass plates were very fragile and boxes of them were heavy.

The Starner exhibit contains an array of Helwig's images, several examples of his 5"x7" glass plate negatives, a box in which plates were sold, photographic paper, the stamp he put on the back of his prints, even small bottles of various chemicals he used. There is also a picture of him seated beside his pretty wife, perhaps taken on the day they were married.

Normal library hours are Wednesday through Saturday from noon until 4 p.m. If photography interests you, take a look at Bob Porterfield's book *Photographers & Photographs of Carroll County 1840-1940* which is for sale in the Historical Society bookshop. Helwig is one of many photographers Porterfield discovered who worked in this area.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.

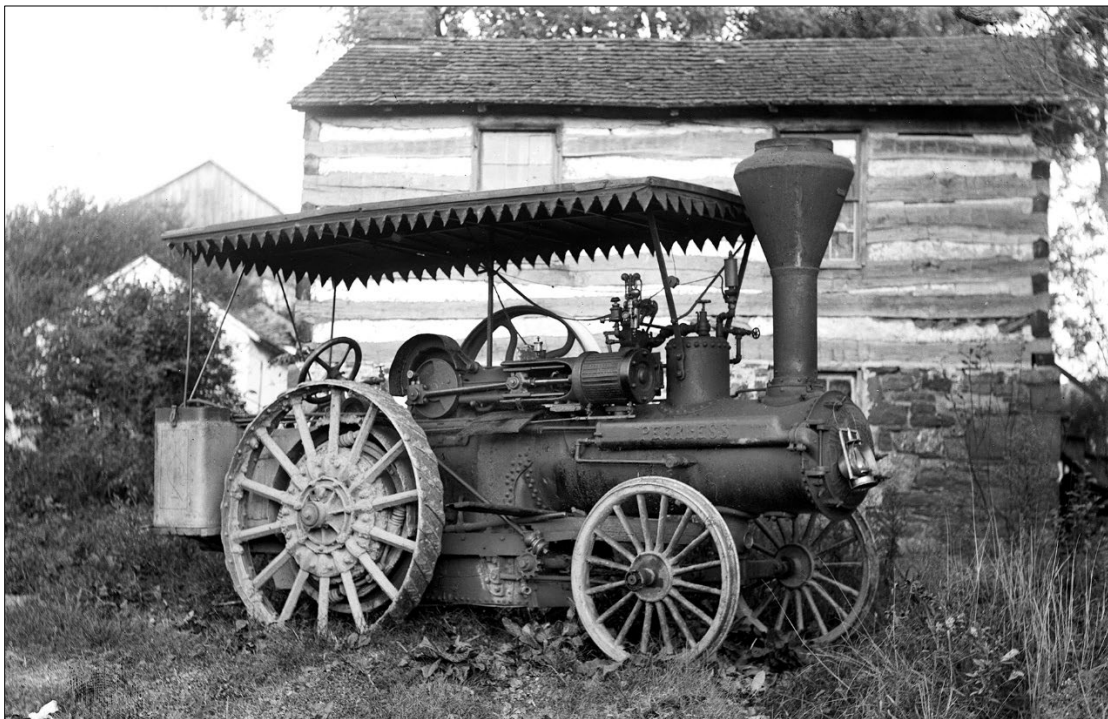


Image 1: Source: Submitted image – Caption: Hollie Helwig's photographs capture aspects of rural Carroll County at the beginning of the 20th century.



Image 2: Source: Submitted image – Caption: Archie F. Myers posed on his bike in Hollie Helwig's home studio.



Image 3: Source: Submitted image – Caption: A Jackson automobile, vintage 1912-1913, appears in front of the Helwig home in Pleasant Valley, perhaps with friends and/or family as passengers. Note the right-hand drive.