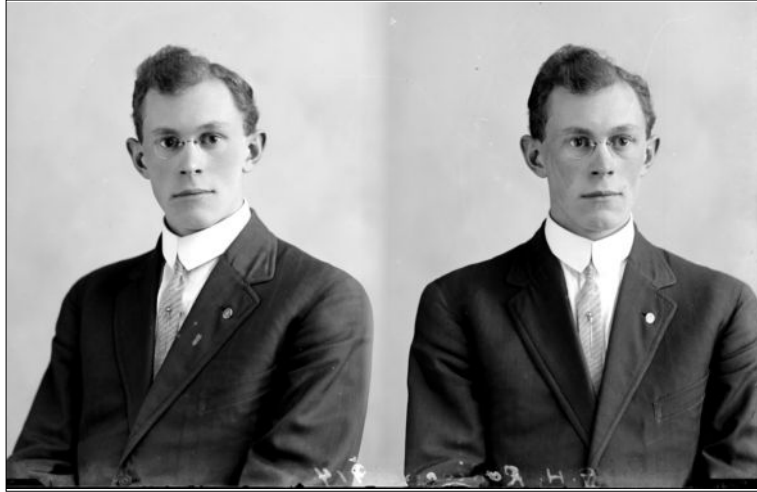


A Box Full of Negatives

Dick Haight



George H. Robison
1891 — 1957

About a dozen years ago, an old house was being torn down in South Haven, Michigan. As part of the official process, a licensed electrician, Bill Keedle, was chosen to certify that all electrical power had been disconnected. After doing his job, Bill made a final walk through the house. It turned out to be not quite empty. He found an old corrugated cardboard box. It was heavy with glass plate negatives. There were no printed pictures and no writing on the box. Keedle carried the 50-pound carton outside and asked the head of the demolition crew about who the negatives might belong to. Nobody knew and nobody cared. So Bill took the box. Since he lived near Allegan, Michigan he later called Marguerite Miller who was then, and still is, involved with the Allegan County Historical Society and Museum. He asked Marguerite whether the museum would take the negatives off his hands. As it happens, the museum already had a closet full of glass plates, so even though this batch probably came from the wrong county, Marguerite accepted them temporarily just to save them.

The nearby twin towns of Saugatuck-Douglas are in Allegan County and they have a vigorous historical society of their own. Each year for the last several seasons, the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society has published a book on some aspect of local history and has mounted an exhibit based on that year's book in their own little museum. The book and exhibit for the 2001 season was based on a donated photo collection from the 1940s and 50s. The donated material came in two wooden boxes of black and white negatives. The negatives were from at least three different-format cameras and were contained in about one thousand little numbered envelopes. The members of the Society originally thought that there were also about 1000 negatives, but that was before they discovered that some envelopes contained as many as a dozen images and that the total was nearer 3000. A volunteer took samples to a nearby commercial photo finisher for an estimate. It turned out that since the work could not be automated, the cost would be about \$3.50 per negative, or over \$10,000.

That was when someone remembered that I had the sort of computer background that might be useful in this situation. As a result my advice, the society now has a Macintosh graphics computer connected to a high-quality photo scanner that can convert both photo prints and negatives into digital images. The computer system cost

under \$5000 and it has been used to do lots of other tasks beyond just viewing the 3000 negatives. One of the things that it turned out to be good at was scanning old glass plate transparencies. I didn't plan it that way — it just happened to work out.

In the fall of 2001 the society started work on their 2002 book about shipwrecks of the Saugatuck area. Kit Lane, society president and co-author of the new book, wanted pictures of artifacts from a locally-famous wreck, the *Chicora*. The artifacts are housed in the old county jail building in Allegan, which is now the Allegan County Museum. So she dragged her co-author, Jack Sheridan, and me to Allegan. Here the plot thickens: As you have guessed by now, the people equipped to scan glass plates have arrived at the temporary home of the orphaned negatives. And guess who greeted us at the museum? Well, that self-same Marguerite Miller who had saved the negatives a decade earlier, that's who. And after we photographed the *Chicora*'s mast and purser's cashbox, Marguerite rather forcefully offered us a 50-pound box of glass plate negatives to take back with us. It felt like being offered a second helping of dessert after Thanksgiving dinner, but how could we refuse? Jack is younger than I am so he got to carry the box to the car.

There seemed to be no urgency about that box. It hadn't even been found in our county. But a week or so later, Jack held a few negatives up to the light and, as a result, took some promising plates to the Saugatuck-Douglas Library — where the Historical Society's Macintosh computer is housed. And there he scanned them.

Surprise, surprise! Most of the pictures were not taken in South Haven proper. As a guess, 30% were taken at Kalamazoo College and another 50% at or near a farm called Fern Glen that was at the northern (i.e., Allegan County) edge of South Haven. The remainder are mostly of unidentified and now unidentifiable places.



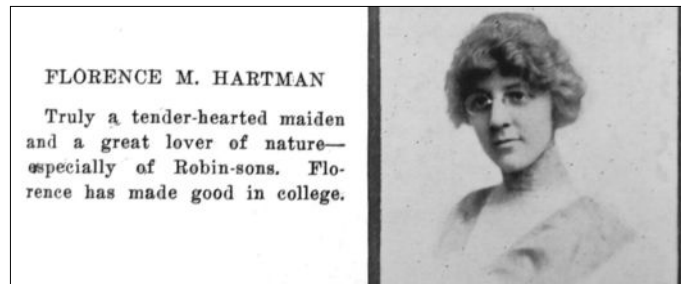
Many of the K College pictures were group portraits of sports teams or student societies (K did not permit fraternities and sororities). We also noticed that a particular young man was in more pictures than anyone else. He also shows up in many pictures not taken at K College. We decided that he was probably the photographer. His double portrait appears on the first page. There is a young woman who also appears in many images. We dubbed them Mr. X and Ms. Y. Occasionally, a negative bore an inked-on title or name. The one to your left is labeled, "Rol Miles, Captain 1912." The title on the portrait shown on page one is "G H Robison." We passed that clue to the archivist of Kalamazoo College, Elizabeth Smith. She and her student helpers found that George Henry Robison was:

- Editor of the K College magazine, the *Index*, during his senior year, 1913,
- He used the left half of the portrait from page one as his graduation picture,
- He had an ad in the graduation issue of the magazine: "Pick up your society or team pictures at 'Buck' Robison's dorm room."

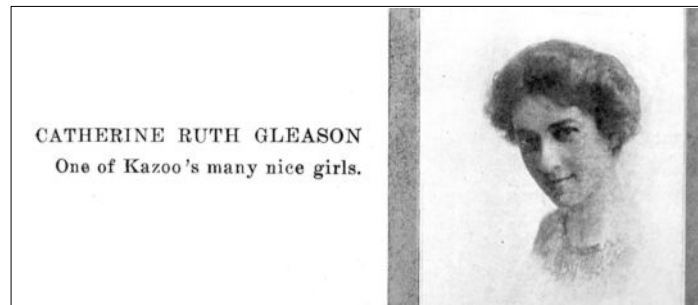
We figured that about settled the identity of the photographer. A note from the alumni

magazine lists George's marriage to Catherine Ruth Gleason in 1921. Catherine also graduated from K in 1913. The woman pictured to the right is the one we had called "Ms Y." For a while we thought she was Catherine, but Catherine's graduation picture didn't match and Ms Y didn't appear in the group photos of the class of '13 taken with George's camera.

In any case, Ms Y appeared in over twenty negatives — nearly half of them by herself. I don't think this happened because she kept walking in front of the camera just as George clicked the shutter. Also, I found it odd that she appeared in both of George's worlds: Both in Kalamazoo and in South Haven. Somehow I doubt if it was commonplace for college boys to take their girlfriends home for weekends in, say, 1913. My assumption has been that, like George, her home was in South Haven. Recently at the K College Archives we found her graduation picture in the June 1914 issue of the *Index*. Here are Florence and Catharine's graduation pictures:



Ms Y, Class of 1914



The future Mrs. George H. Robison, Class of 1913

From Ms Hartman's name we quickly worked back to her 1910 college admission form which confirmed that she was indeed from South Haven. In spite of the coy (catty?) reference to George in Florence's four-line bio, by the time George got around to marrying in 1921, Florence was more properly known as Mrs. Frederick Leon Burge. She was also the principal of the Amasa, Michigan High School between 1919 and 1922. This has to have been a very unusual accomplishment for the time. Later, she and her husband moved back to South Haven where he had a store and she had a son, Fredrick and later taught at the high school. She died of a sudden illness on graduation day, June 1930, hours before she was scheduled to speak at the commencement ceremony.



About George H's Camera Equipment



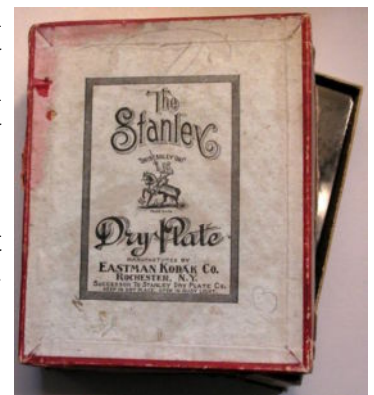
The 300+ negatives represent four plate sizes: 5"x7", 4"x5", 3 1/4"x4 1/4" and 3 1/4"x3 1/4". The largest format would definitely have been for a view camera — you know, a camera on a big tripod with ground glass focusing under a black cloth hood. Most of the 5x7 negatives were group portraits. The three smaller formats may all have been used with a single camera body since the film holder at the back of such cameras could be adapted to different negative sizes. That camera (or cameras) could have been hand held. The camera pictured above is an example of the type. Note the waist-level viewfinder at the front. Holding the camera against the chest is much steadier than using an eye-level finder. George confirmed my suspicion about the viewfinder by leaving his nearly headless shadow in this picture of this girl eating watermelon.

George's negatives were not loose in the big cardboard box. Glass plates were very fragile so they were sold in sturdy boxes. The developed plates are just as breakable, so George did the obvious thing: He put his negatives back in the boxes they came in. The box shown here is pretty well preserved, but most of them are now split open and mouse-eaten.

The camera feature that allows the photographer to get into his picture is not a strictly "modern" innovation. Photographers have used a rubber bulb and a long air tube to trip the shutter since the 1890s. The purposeful double exposure portrait at the beginning of this document is an example of the flexibility of such early equipment.

I'm not surprised that George H. advertised prints for sale to his fellow students at K College. In today's prices, a box of twelve 5x7 negatives was probably over \$50. He had an expensive hobby.

When scanning George's negatives, I have largely ignored his scenic shots. For instance, there are several dramatic pictures of Lake Michigan. I have taken hundreds like them myself, but unless a negative contained recognizable people or buildings, I have not taken the time to convert it to a digital image.



George and his equipment had some photographic shortcomings. I believe that the emulsion side of the plate was supposed to be on the other side of the glass from the camera's lens, but George was inconsistent about loading his film. As a result, we cannot tell which way some of the pictures go. Also unfortunately, he had a couple film holders that leaked light. Many pictures taken on sunny days are light struck. And his darkroom technique was casual at times. There are occasional negatives that suggest that the developing solution was not well mixed when the negative was inserted in the tray (see "Rufnex" below). There are lots of white specs on the prints that come from fuzz or other foreign junk in the solutions as well as black voids from emulsion that has been knocked off the surface. He also left partial fingerprints on several negatives. When I got interested in darkroom photography two generations after George I had some of the same problems. I'm sure they were more daunting in his day. The side-by-side pictures below illustrate some of the flaws. The left-hand version is unretouched. It contains imbedded specks, streaks and a big "hypo" stain. The right-hand copy has been extensively restored.

By the way, I realize that there are purists about antique photos who do not believe in restoration of this sort. But I don't agree. The photographer crops reality when the picture is taken. The image is usually cropped again when it's printed. Exposure and contrast are inevitably modified to suit someone's taste. If George had my neat digital tools I believe he would have done what I did here. Besides, this girl didn't deserve to be speckled, smeared and spotted.



But these are minor quibbles. George managed to take many wonderful pictures. His group photos are very well composed and his people have their eyes open and look pleased to participate. There is a vivid *persona* behind his photos. Only that could have gotten me to spend so many hours on his negatives. My co-worker in this effort, Jack Sheridan, says that scanning just one of George's pictures is more difficult than eating just one potato chip.

George H. Robison's Family

Much of the initial information about the Robisons came from Liz Smith, Kalamazoo College archivist. Janet Stieve, South Haven's unofficial historian, searched local newspaper microfilms.

Briefly, George's father, George Washington Robison, bought twenty acres of South Haven "north shore" property in 1895. The "farm," as they referred to it, was named Fern Glen. George H. (GHR) took more pictures at Fern Glen than anywhere else. GHR was the youngest of the four children of George W. and his wife Mary Elizabeth Fair Robison. Between 1909 and 1913 GHR attended Kalamazoo College and, as I mentioned, took lots of pictures and sold prints to his classmates. After college, he worked as a teacher in Chicago for a while before moving to Arizona. He taught "commercial" subjects including shorthand and became a school administrator quite early in his career.

During World War I, he served as a lieutenant in the Army at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. As mentioned earlier, in 1921 he married his classmate Catherine Gleason. He was 30 and she was 33 (but he did not know this detail until after she died). They moved to San Diego where their three sons, William, George D., and Robert, still live. Catherine died in 1952. George was remarried in 1953 to his cousin Grayce. Her portrait appears later in this document. He died in 1957.

Janet Stieve found the sons first names in an old obituary from the *South Haven Tribune*. Using this ancient clue and the Internet White Pages, I found their current San Diego phone numbers. And from that, I luckily discovered that George D's wife Jane is "connected" so she can share electronic images with the brothers and send information by email back to me. Oddly, the heirs were scarcely aware of GHR's photographic past.

The brothers were very surprised to hear from me.

Dick Haight

December 2002

[Text © 2002 Dick Haight — images belong to the Robison brothers]

See attached pictures . . .

A Few Sample Photos

Friends from Illinois

The Robison's moved from Streator, Illinois to South Haven in 1895. Halladay autos like the one shown here were built in Streator up into the 1920s. I think this one is about a 1910 model. Note the Streator pennants hanging from the windshield frame. GHR's mother, Mary, is sitting on the left side of the front seat. The steering wheel is on the other side.



Tableau?

This is pure guesswork, but I think the following picture was of a “tableau” performance. My stab at a title is “Bluebeard’s Wives.”



Little girl, little boy both in dresses

One of the many labeled pictures from Fern Glen. But who were they? George was good with kids, though.



Cooling off in Lake Michigan

The Fern Glen property included a considerable stretch of lake frontage. I'm pretty sure that GHR did not take this picture. My guess is that either his father, George W or older brother Ben, stood hip deep in the lake to take this image. I believe that George H is the boy with his hand raised — and his mother is next to him. It is interesting to note that there are electric and phone lines on the beach. These may be left over from then-recent beach-side logging operations. A few hundred feet away, the Robison home was lighted by kerosene lanterns.



Couples

George took several interestingly composed pictures of couples. There wasn't any lovey-dovey stuff, though. Out of perhaps thirty pictures of couples only a single image shows the pair actually touching each other.

To the right, tension comes from the couple's efforts to balance on the tracks. They aren't exactly together but they are traveling in parallel. I don't think that the composition was spontaneous. George set it up.



The overdressed pair below left are together for a stroll on the beach. Or they are *almost* together. She looks like she might wander off toward George instead. Or maybe they were holding hands and let go when they saw the camera. And tricky George has climbed up on something — probably the South Haven Beach lifeguard tower. I cropped away a lot of empty beach and lake that George intended as part of this picture.



In my third example, the couple is going visiting. They are hardly shod for a serious walk in the snow. And I think the guy is carrying something for their hostess — who is probably only a house or two away. And note the utility poles. They are only for phone service — no electricity on that street.



George's Parents

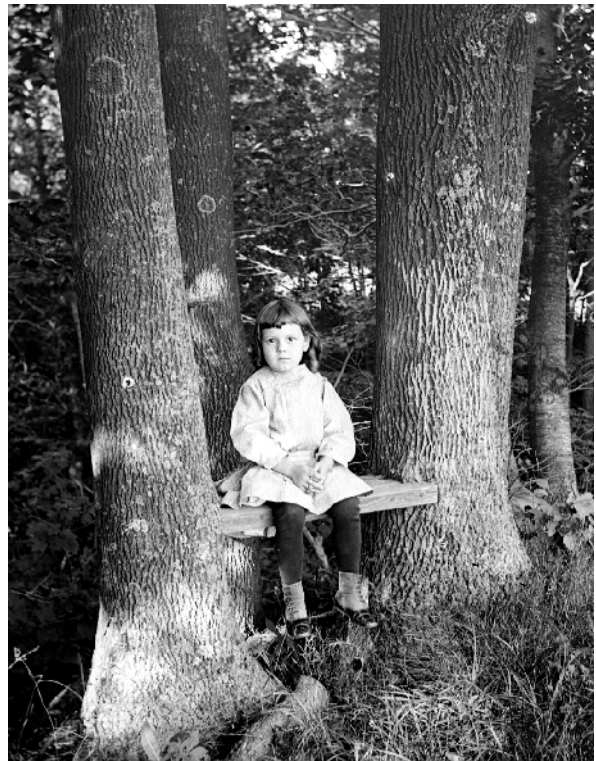
We mistakenly dubbed these people “Grandma” and “Grandpa” at first, not knowing that George was the last of George W and Mary Fair Robison’s children. Here they are both in the parlor at Fern Glen where many other pictures were taken. George H’s self portrait (see page 1) is on the table beside his mother.



The bench in the woods

George took a lot of shots at this site. I had already chosen to include this image before the current Robisons discovered a homemade postcard posted by GHR with this picture printed on it. It’s dated the summer of 1909. The little girl is Grayce Fair Pease, his first-cousin once removed (his mother’s sister’s child’s child). Grayce was born in 1905. George called her “Tootsie” on the card and said that his mother was then busy with thirty guests at Fern Glen. They must have been stacked up like cordwood. Shades of Thomas Wolfe.

As I mentioned earlier, after his first wife Catherine died, George married Grayce. He was well over 60, she was 48. Jane Robison remembers Grayce as her mother-in-law. She probably appears in other pictures, but her face here is too unformed for me to recognize her.



Dates of pictures

Grayce's image is the only explicitly dated picture we've discovered so far. However there are a couple of photos that contain calendars. Below, George is at it again with his rubber bulb remote shutter release — probably under his right foot. Inset in the upper left corner is an enlarged detail from the center of the picture. Left-to-right, it shows Florence's K graduation picture, a collar stud and an oddly-formatted calendar with the days of the week listed in a column. The month is May and the first is on Friday. Using my computer calendar program, the only plausible year is 1914. So I assume this is George's room in Chicago the spring after he graduated from K (he's been teaching in Downers Grove). It is 8:40 AM (it would have been dark out by 8:40 PM). I can't tell the day-of-month.

Next to the clock, the book with the white dust cover is titled "The White Shrine," which I assume is about the Masonic Lodge's "White Shrine of Jerusalem." His own picture in cap-and-gown is at the right edge of the rather feminine-looking dressing table. And a can of talcum powder and his brush set are in front of it. He is obviously loosing his hair — I bet he brushed vigorously. His "rep" ties look oddly up-to-date.

The photo stuck in the top of the mirror is of a girl sitting in a canoe on dry land. I only recognize it because the negative was in the cardboard box.



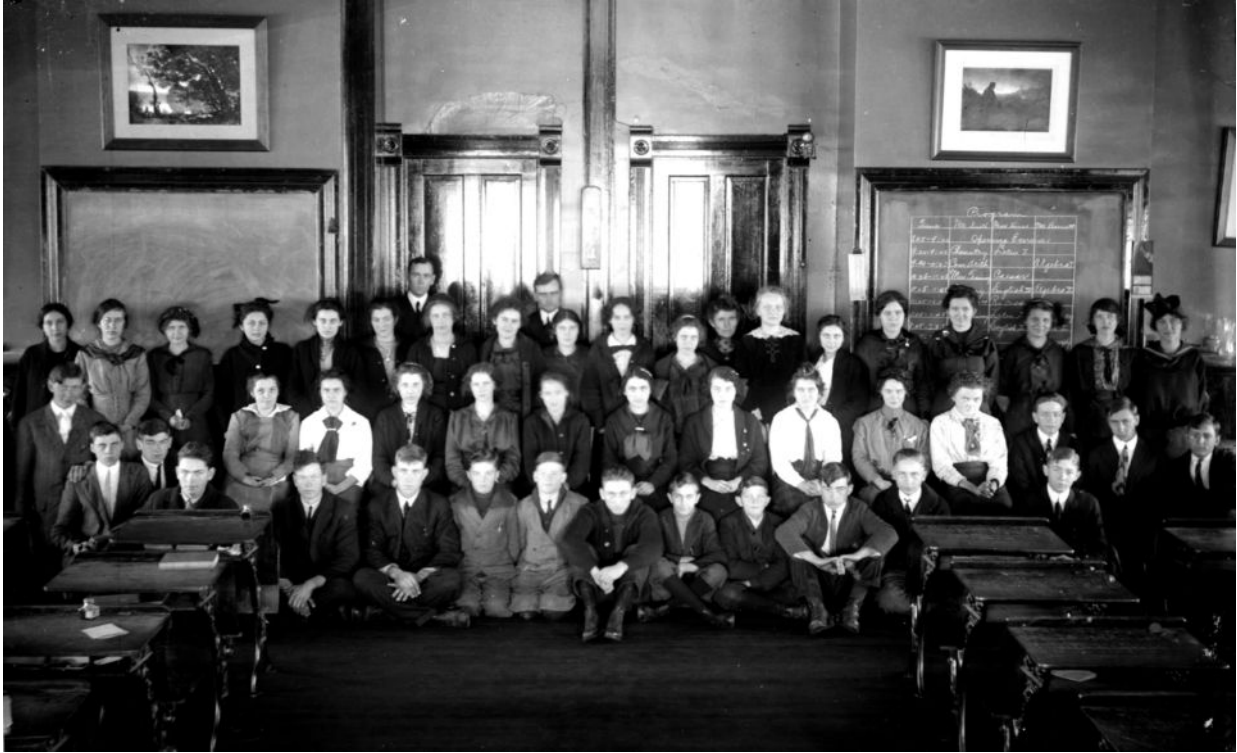
Gag Photos

Then there was George's way of getting people into goofy poses. Mr. Mustache here is probably his Uncle Ben who managed the farm. He stars in at least fifteen photos. I could get a whole short story out of this picture. It's a windy summer Monday (i.e., wash day) at Fern Glen. And it's a big wash because they probably have summer boarders in residence. The washing has overflowed the many clothes lines so the socks hang on the kitchen garden fence. It's a big vegetable garden, at that. Anyway, unmarried Ben has been talked into slipping on his sister-in-law's girdle and hoops to go with the broken umbrella and silly straw hat. He looks distinctly uncomfortable. And if George's mother catches them he will probably be in more trouble than George.



High school students

I have no idea where this school was (South Haven, perhaps) but there are several interesting things about the scene. George did not use flash powder often, but he did here. The three teachers are in the back row and their names are on the blackboard along with the class schedule. They are Messrs Barnett and Smith and Miss Hines. Miss Hines is older and quite short.



In the detail below, note that the class schedule is called the *Program*. Miss Hines teaches English and Latin; Barnett just does math and Smith has a grab bag from chemistry to manual training. The probable reason this picture was taken is that the teacher closest to the middle was one of George's best friends (Mr. Smith?). He appears in several other negatives including a formal wedding photo where he is the groom and George appears to be best man. The print above the schedule blackboard is presumably Jesus at Gethsemane. Mary and Child decorate the little calendar to the right of the board. Separation of church and state was taken with a grain of salt in those days.

Time	Mr. Smith	Miss Hines	Mr. Barnett
8:45-9:00	Opening Exercises		
9:00-9:40	Chemistry	Latin I	
9:40-10:25	Com. Smith		Algebra I
10:25-11:05	Man. Training	Caesar	
11:05-11:45		English	Algebra II

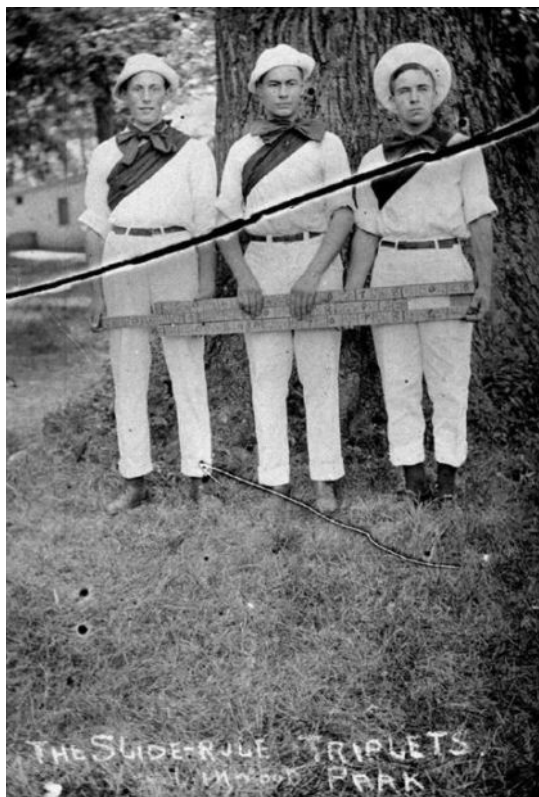
George was very good with children — and he liked this apple tree as a prop.

The previous owners of Fern Glen homesteaded the property in 1850. So, between then and about 1910 the land was cleared, an orchard was planted, it matured and by the time this picture was taken, the trees had already grown old.

The girl on the left seems wonderfully serene



Here George is at it again — getting people into silly poses that is. The three well-covered ladies are pretending to dive into about enough water to float a rowboat. I'm sure this wasn't *their* idea.



Most of George's pictures were taken in one of two places: at or near Fern Glen like the two on this page or later in Kalamazoo when he was a student at K College between 1909 and 1913.

I believe he was still going to South Haven High School when both of the pictures on this page were taken (he is leftmost in both). Linwood Park was a *gentile* resort a mile north of Fern Glen.

I think the banner-covered room below was George's bedroom at home. The guy with the mandolin is George's teacher friend in the school group a few pages back. There are later pictures of the room. Over time more banners and more pictures were added to the wall. The "K" on the sweater was laboriously drawn on the negative. Film from George's time was very insensitive to K College's dark red color. And the title is fun.



At Kalamazoo College

This group shot was posed on the steps of the girls dorm. The house mother is in the back row with a watch pinned to her ample bosom. Florence Hartman (Ms Y) is second row, third from right. She and the girl to her right just ruined George's first attempt at this portrait by whispering secrets.



*"Is that your
boyfriend?"*



Buildings

George repeatedly photographed K College buildings. None of the 1913-era structures are still standing.



K Baseball

This is the 1912 baseball team. Captain Rolly Miles, who appeared earlier, is seated second from the right.



Women's Basketball

George was pretty even handed in the proportion of women to men in his pictures. But this was the only women's team he photographed. The "15" on the ball proves that George came back to visit after his graduation. And he brought his camera.



The Gaynor Club

These are the members of the then well-known K College women's glee club. Extravagantly hatted and furred, they await a train that will carry them off for a weekend singing date. In the back row, the woman fourth from the left is faculty. Also in back, Florence Hartman with her ever-present pince-nez is just to the right of the girl with bird wings on her hat. The cop seems to be *sans* pistol but has a big stick and is keeping a sharp eye on things. Perhaps there was an ordinance against giggling. Even that seems unlikely with this well-behaved bunch.

George took this with his 5x7 view camera. He probably had to carry the big camera case and tripod the half mile down hill from the college to the station. I wonder, did the girls help? From the direction of the eyes of some of his subjects, I'd guess he stood to the left of the camera with his rubber bulb and said or did something silly to get them all to smile. In the exact center of the back row stands a pretty girl with good cheekbones. Did she choose that spot — or did George?

Surprisingly, the Kalamazoo train station has hardly changed at all in the ninety years that have passed.

Do you recognize the girl at the far right from my retouching example?

This is an exceptional group photo — and it's my favorite picture out of the whole box.

