

A Peek at the Past

J.W.C Floyd's window to another time

By MATT CONNOR
POSTED: March 22, 2008

This advertisement was for John Wilbur Clarence Floyd's photo shop, located on the second floor of a building that used to stand where Reece's Print Shop is today.
PHOTO PROVIDED

With a name that could have been invented by a children's book author — think Dr. Seuss or E.B. White — John Wilbur Clarence Floyd was not a politician or preacher or lumberman, but his imprint on the history of Clinton County is today felt more strongly than almost any other individual.

That's because anytime you come across a photograph taken in Lock Haven between 1881 and 1906 — the peak of the city's Victorian-era boom time — it was almost certainly the skilled work of John Wilbur Clarence Floyd you're seeing.

Indeed, Floyd single-handedly preserved the visual history of Lock Haven and its surrounding communities during the 20 years he was the city's dominant photographer, shooting at least 100,000 photographs of buildings, people and events during the course of his career, according to Ross Library officials.

In fact, there are so many Floyd photos from that era stored in the library's archives that many of them have yet to be catalogued and indexed.

Floyd appears to have been quite a colorful character. A man with a keen interest in entertainment technology, he brought recorded sound to Lock Haven when he began selling gramophones at his photo shop, retailing early Edison music recordings and holding "phonographic concerts" for passers-by on Main Street.

He also shot silent films for the old Bioscope studio during the earliest days of the movie industry.

Married three times during his residence in Lock Haven, Floyd was a tireless self-promoter, advertising frequently in the newspapers of the day and launching publicity stunts that sometimes went awry.

He came to Lock Haven from Cincinnati at age 28, in 1881, taking over a photographic business formerly operated by a Mr. F.W. Wood. He set up shop on the second floor of 13 1/2 Main Street, in a building that is no longer standing (that address is currently the home of Reese's Print Shop). Very soon he became the busiest and most popular photographer in town.

Clients ranged from the Seltzer Coronet Band to veterans' and fraternal organizations to prominent local individuals, who commissioned portraits of themselves and their families and of their grand homes.

He captured Lock Haven street scenes and buildings in photos that today serve as some of the only existing visual records of Clinton County as it was in that era, a window into another time.

In 1883 he married for the first time, to Erma L. Gast, whom he probably met and courted while in Cincinnati. It was a short, but highly-publicized marriage.

Described as "the social event of the season" by the Clinton Democrat newspaper, the wedding of Floyd and Gast was attended by seventy five locals, after which the bride and groom went on an extended honeymoon to the great Eastern cities, including Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Washington, D.C.

Alas, the Floyd-Gast union was cut short by tragedy, as Erma died a few months after the flood of 1889, probably of typhoid.

Just three years later Floyd married for the second time, to Jessie Batcheler, the daughter of a prominent local family (Jesse's grandfather was Cephas Batcheler, a building contractor and architect responsible for the Fallon Hotel and the W.A. Simpson mansion on West Water Street, among others).

That wedding, too, was well-covered in the local media, with detailed descriptions of the bride's dress, the music performed at the ceremony and the guest list, which — unlike with Floyd's first marriage — was restricted to a few family members and close friends.

His acquaintanceship with Jessie's grandfather probably accounted for an interest in local architecture, according to the book, "Historic Lock Haven: An Architectural Survey." Soon Floyd began compiling a photographic record of some of the most significant buildings in the city.

Strangely enough, Floyd had bad luck with his second wife, as well. She lived only to age 24, passing away March 31, 1896, less than four years after they exchanged vows.



Before, during and after his first two marriages, Floyd grew increasingly prominent in the life of the city, with accounts of his purchase of property, improvements to his shop, and showman-like efforts to promote his business all appearing frequently in the local papers through the turn of the century.

In 1890, for example, he advertised a contest in which he would release a 16-foot-long balloon over the city. The individual who retrieved the balloon would receive \$2.50 in cash and \$5 worth of photographs.

Unfortunately the balloon burst into flames after ascending about a half-mile into the sky. A hoop connected to the balloon fell onto Church Street, where it was found by one Claude Miller. Floyd was a good sport about it, and gave Miller the promised \$2.50 reward (the equivalent of about \$57 today).

Always an innovator, Floyd purchased a camera light in 1894, allowing him to take photos in darker outdoor settings.

"The light proved to be a wonderful contrivance and encourage the photographing of night parties," one newspaper reported.

He continued to be enormously busy, attending photographers' conventions, helping to organize a camera club and taking photos of school children, letter carriers, bicycle parades, workers of a steam laundry facility, and a multitude of other area people, events and locations.

At the same time he continued to maintain a vigorous retail business, selling "cabinet photographs," frames, phonograph recordings and other photo- and music-related products at his establishment.

In 1906 he married for the last time, to Blanche Bickford, a scion of the wealthy Bickford lumbering family, who worked in his photo lab.

"That the little love God Cupid gets little work most unsuspectingly and romantically at times, has been demonstrated in the courtship and marriage of J.W.C. Floyd, the well known photographer, and Miss Blanche E. Bickford, his retoucher, who has been in his employ for the past six years," the Clinton Democrat reported in its March 19, 1906 issue.

"Thus while the compact between the two began as one strictly of business, sooner or later the business association grew into friendship, and as the days came and went while the photographer leveled his camera on the many faces and forms in his studio, and the fair retoucher unceasingly worked away completing the fine photos for which the Floyd gallery has become noted, admiration for each other's charms and good traits followed which speedily ripened into love."

Immediately after the reception, the newly-minted Floyds left for Pueblo, Colorado, where they remained for the rest of their days. Floyd's local photography business was left to his assistant, Henry Swope, who continued to operate at the location for several years.

In Pueblo, Floyd opened a new photo studio and in 1915 began his career in silent movies. In those days, the movie cameras were cumbersome devices which required the cameraman to hand-crank the film while constantly working to keep the subject in frame and in focus.

"It's a queer game," Floyd told the Pueblo, Colo. Star-Journal newspaper. "In order to take a motion picture and get it correctly on the film, one must be able to make the mind and hands perform two things at the same time. One hand must wind the film and the other adjust the machine and both hands must work constantly at their separate task... I have had my machine for long enough now to manage it, but at first it seemed to me the work was about the most difficult I have ever taken."

In 1925 the Floyd photo studio on Main Street was consumed by fire, and two years later Swope died of a heart attack in the same studio, which he had rebuilt after the conflagration. Floyd died at age 77 in 1930, and his wife, Blanche, in 1948.

Sixty years later the world has changed so drastically that Blanche and John Wilbur Clarence Floyd would hardly recognize it today.

Affordable cameras are commonplace in most households, and they rarely even require the use use of film. Movies not only have voices but they, too, are increasingly shot digitally.

Even the compact disc — the distant descendant of the Edison phonograph records sold at the Floyd studio — appears to be an endangered species, as young people increasingly download their favorite music off of the Internet.

With his interest in new entertainment technologies, Floyd himself would probably embrace these changes enthusiastically if he were alive today.

And before long he'd surely be scurrying around town, shooting pictures with a new high-tech camera, and — just as he did during an earlier time — preserving the visual history of this era for generations yet to come.

[Subscribe to The Express](#)