

Richard Smith Elliott, "Daguerreotypes / First gallery in St. Louis," 1883

(keywords: John Plumbe, Samuel F. B. Morse, John H. Fitzgibbon, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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CHAPTER XXX.

AT WASHINGTON—ELECTRO MAGNETIC TELEGRAPH—WHAT HATH GOD
WROUGHT—DAGUERREOTYPES—INDIANS TAKEN OFF—FIRST GALLERY IN
ST. LOUIS— FITZGIBBON—INDIANS AND THE PRESIDENT—OP-TE-KE-SHICK
THE ORATOR— THE HATCHET—AN ATMOSPHERE—USE OF THE PRESS.

Fuller's Hotel at Washington, now Willard's, afforded the Pottawatamies ample quarters. Better housed than ever before, they took it all as a matter of course, but were not fussy guests, and had no use for the bootblack. Some of our friends, the 'traders,' were in the city, of whom I remember Col. Geo. W. Ewing and Capt. Joseph A. Sire. The Indians were in debt to these gentlemen, and if a treaty was to be made, it was well enough for the rights of all to be looked after; and the Chiefs were very much gratified to have their friends present, although the sapient Indian bureau regarded the merchants who had credited the members of the tribe as little better than thieves and robbers.

Col. Ewing was especially useful to us, as he could 'talk Indian,' and help to interpret. When we went to see the 'Electro-Magnetic Telegraph,' as it was called,—having been only six months in use for general business between Washington and Baltimore—he aided to explain it, and made quite a speech to the Chiefs about the Great Spirit, the lightning, and Professor Morse. The Professor was then the Genius of the Century, although he may perhaps be almost forgotten ere its close. Congress, after weary begging, had aided him to get in operation the line from Washington to Baltimore, and private enterprise (October 1845) was carrying it on, even to Philadelphia and New York! But hardly anybody anticipated the extent to which the telegraph would come into use, and to 'put a girdle round the world' by cables in the seas was not yet dreamed of. The first message ever sent by an electric telegraph line was the sentence—"WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT," transmitted from Washington to Baltimore, May 24, 1844. This message was suggested by Miss Annie Ellsworth, a lass in her teens, who had been the first to inform Mr. Morse that his bill had passed Congress.

The telegraph was 'great medicine' to the Chiefs. Years before they had learned why it was that a piece of paper, with marks on it, could convey ideas and preserve them; but this thing of stretching a wire on posts forty miles, sending along any thing one wanted to say, and having the reply in a minute, jotted down in mysterious dots and dashes on a strip of paper, was something akin to what the Great Spirit himself might be expected to

do if he felt in the humor. They would not have been able to believe it all if they had not seen that Col. Ewing, Capt. Sire, and myself gave full credence; and when old Wah-bon-seh had his name sent to Baltimore, and it came clicking back before he had time for more than three whiffs of his pipe, he expelled the last draught of smoke through his venerable nostrils, gave us a monstrous ‘ugh!’ and declared that he had seen so many wonders in his life that he must now be called Twilight, as it was not worth while ever to see any more.

The Daguerreotype gallery of John Plumbe, near Brown’s Hotel (now the Metropolitan), was a palace of wonders, not only to the Indians, but to many of our white fellow-mortals who had never yet been portrayed by the Daguerrean artist. It was only in 1839, six years before, that Monsieur Daguerre had brought his process into public use, and the French government (perhaps as enlightened in some things as our own) had purchased it for the general benefit; and making pictures by self-acting light was not by any means so universal as now, when we have the photograph and artotype; and poor old Daguerre, who no doubt thought himself famous, is almost gone into oblivion. The New York Herald, in November 1845, had a Washington letter which said:

“The greatest wonder of all to country folks are those who take other people off without touching them at all. Among them is the gentleman at Plumbe’s Daguerrean gallery. He takes everybody off, from the President down to common folks. Here are John Tyler old, John Tyler young, and hundreds of others, all hanging up with their backs against the walls as natural and life-like as if they were living, breathing creatures. Pottawatamies were there too. I saw them the other day, and never saw them look better than they do in plates; (they’re pretty good along side of a plate, if full enough). Among them is Wah-bon-seh, the old brave of whom McKenny, in his ‘North American Indians,’ gives us a striking portrait and an interesting biography. This old fellow’s name means literally Dawn of Day, and he gained it by an exploit of his youth. He went solus on an expedition against the Osages, to avenge the death of a friend; stole into their camp, tomahawked a dozen before the alarm was given, and then escaped just as the day was dawning. ‘Wah-bon-seh!’ he exclaimed, ‘day a little!’ and took that for his name. In the Black Hawk war he was very active on behalf of the whites. Shah-be-nay, another chief, is well portrayed. This man distinguished himself about the time the Black Hawk war broke out, by his expeditions to warn the inhabitants of Illinois of their danger. Half Day, the orator of the party, is a fine-looking Indian, and makes a capital picture. He is a jolly fellow, and says his picture would look much better with ‘two white squaws,’ one on each side. The Indians were much surprised at the magnetic telegraph, but more at the Daguerreotype process.’

The young reader will hardly know what the Daguerreotype was—a picture taken on a metallic plate, before the art came in of taking pictures on prepared paper. Miss Lilly has only known of what we call the Photograph, or its multiplier, the Artotype. But her greatest misfortune (and that of Adonis too) is that the advancement in Science and Art has in the last fifty years been so great, that there is nothing left to wonder at. Things which afforded us surprise and taxed our faculties in efforts to understand them, thus giving us the double pleasure of excited wonder and triumph over mystery, are now so common that Lilly and Adonis lose all the enjoyment we had in old times over strange things; and they can only go on telling each other the old, old story, which, they may thank their Creator, will ever be new to each generation. But as to the old Daguerreotype process, I might say that it made a better picture than the photographic art can show,

judging by my own likeness, taken in 1845 at Plumbe's gallery; for I defy any Photographer to make as handsome a picture of me now!

The amount of cheap pleasure afforded by photography is incalculable. Adonis can have his Lilly's pretty face for his pocketbook at a cost so small as to be almost contemptible; but only a little over forty years ago her painted miniature would have been too dear for his purse. Among the first cities of the world to enjoy the results of Daguerre's art was St. Louis, as a gallery was established by John H. Fitzgibbon in 1841, only two years after the French had made the process public. This excellent man went to his rest in 1882, but the St. Louis Photographer, a monthly journal founded by him, is continued under Mrs. Fitzgibbon, and is the exponent of photographic art for the great valley.

FITZGIBBON.

Long years ago he drew
The magic pictures by the sun's assistance;
The art was then so curious and so new,
We wonder'd it had come so great a distance,
With such perfection and a touch so true.

For scarce Daguerre had thrown
His wond'rous process open to the nations,
When here on Mississippi's banks 'twas known,
By our Fitzgibbon's dext'rous ministrations,
And portraits in our cabinets were shown

My infant darlings then
Were taken off with marvellous precision;
Though long since women grown and men,
I see them smiling in a happy vision,
As if their childhood were all back again.

Our Chiefs called on Senator Benton and had a talk. Mrs. Jessie Benton Fremont was present, and much pleased to meet frontier people who knew of her adventurous husband. Our half-breed interpreters, who had learned French from Canadian voyageurs before the Pottawatamies had left their homes near Chicago, were delighted with Madame's conversation in that language, and wondered that a lady could speak French so well, who had grown up so far away from where they had learned it. Senator Benton had received us with as much courtesy as if we had been the entire diplomatic corps, and promised his aid in adjusting our affairs with the government.

J. Knox Walker, President Polk's Secretary, had been formally advised that the Pottawatamie ambassadors would pay their respects to the President of the United States, at any hour to suit the convenience of their Great Father; and soon an orderly brought us a gilt-edged note from Mr. Walker as instructed by the President, directing the next day and the hour of noon for the ceremony. Part of the night was spent in solemn council, and the next morning was devoted to personal adornment. LeClaire, Holliday and Beaubien, half-breeds, had come down to the white man's dress, but the Chiefs rejected with scorn the suggestion of any costume but that of the prairie. It had gotten out that the interview was to take place, and when we filed out from Fuller's and marched toward the White

House, our conspicuous and somewhat picturesque procession had a crowd of spectators big enough to stamp us as the best show of the day.

President Polk, Secretary of War Marcy, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Medill, received us in a spacious apartment; and we were also honored by the presence of several ladies. Op-te-ke-shick, or Half Day, addressed the President:

“My Great Father: You see your red children, the Chief and Braves of the Pottawatamies. We are very glad to shake you by the hand. We have come a long way and our hearts beat lively when we see you.”

President Polk replied that he was very much pleased to meet his red children from the far west.

“You have come,” he continued, “a long distance to the seat of government, and you consider the business which has brought you here of importance. It shall be attended to. Full justice shall be done to you. The government desires to preserve relations of friendship and peace to all the Indian tribes, so that the hatchet between the red man and the white man may long remain buried.”

Having, like a skillful diplomatist, drawn out these professions and promises, Op-te-ke-shick proceeded to deliver the speech agreed on in our night council:

“My Father: Your chiefs and braves here present respect the government of the United States. All our people at home respect the government. The white man is our friend and we are his. We have always given you our land when you asked for it. We never refused you. Like good children we always said yes.

“Father: We have given you all our land about the Great Lakes. Look at it. Millions of white men can live on it. They are now on it. It is a great country, and it contains the bones of our grandfathers. It is ours no longer, but we love it still. When we look back to it our hearts are sad.

“Father: You gave us a country on the Missouri, where we now are. Twelve winters ago at Chicago you told us it should be our home as long as the sun shines and water flows; that we should grow up there like the grass in the prairies; and that all you had promised should be done for us there. We have not seen it.

“Father: We love the country where we are. But you have asked us to go southwest of the Missouri. We do not know what to do. There is a cloud before us, and we look to you to remove it. We can depend on no one but you.

“Father: If we stay where we are, we are told the white man’s laws will be extended over us by the State of Iowa. We do not understand them.

“Father: You are from the West. You know what your red children want. You can make us see clearly and make our hearts glad.”

The President made another speech and told us the Secretary of War would look into the case and see justice done. All the promises of the government, he said, should be kept; and after everything should be arranged he would like to see us all again before starting home. Then we shook hands all ’round and marched back to Fuller’s, where we discussed the President’s speeches, which had afforded the Chiefs much satisfaction, except the sentence about the hatchet. They had heard so much of the hatchet, which they had (figuratively) buried so many years before, that they were tired of it; and besides, they had lived so long on the border of civilization, that they thought this hatchet talk, which might do for the wild fellows out on the plains, ought to be dropped. I was awfully tired of it too. I had taken a distaste to the mention of a hatchet in childhood, when it seemed to me so absurd to give little George Washington so much applause for simply telling the truth, which was a common thing in our family. When Father inquired what

had become of the piece of buckskin which he intended for a patch on his riding clothes where the saddle had worn them, I never thought of anything else than just to tell him that I had taken it for the boys to cover their balls with; but from what followed right away after I have always doubted Mr. Weemes' pretty story of the way little George's father behaved to him about the cutting of the cherry tree.

As Col. Ewing and I were taking our late oysters to sleep on, he said—

“Major, who are those fellows prowling through the corridors after our Indians? Goggles!—yes, sir—one of them with goggles on ! They pushed in at the President's to-day too. And there's old Sam Stambaugh—what's he after? He has enough to do to look after his Cherokees.”

“Don't be disturbed, Colonel. Its all right. Those fellows, as you call them, are the gentlemen to make an atmosphere.”

“An atmosphere? What the deuce is an atmosphere? “

“Just wait, and you'll see.”

“Well, all I've got to say is—don't lend them any money.”

“No fear of that. They're not after money.”

“Then what do they want, if not money? Everybody in Washington wants money.”

“Not of course. But wait and see.”

I would give him no explanation; but when Father Ritchie's paper, the Union, official organ of Mr. Polk's administration, came out next morning with a two column editorial written by Col. Stambaugh, giving a graphic account of our call at the White House, and assuring everybody that justice must and should be done to the noble Pottawatamies, who had come all the way from Council Bluffs to get it; and when, next day, the New York Herald and Philadelphia Ledger got in, the glowing letters about the 'red brethren,' their intelligent friend (giving me the proper title of Colonel), the great wrongs of the Indians, the splendid domain on the Missouri, which the government wanted to wheedle them out of, and so on, the way to make an 'atmosphere,' and the use to be made of it, became palpable to the apprehension of Col. Ewing.

I was using the Press. We had paraded to visit Col. Benton, to see the telegraph, and the Daguerrean gallery, had inspected the curiosities of the Patent Office (where a suit of Washington's every-day clothes were preserved in a glass case), and had taken a look at the Capitol; but only a few persons saw us after all, and only a limited public sentiment could be created by all this marching and countermarching. Besides, how would the gazing public know what to think of us? But the newspapers carried us everywhere, and told the people what views they ought to take of us; and the public, as in duty bound, was on our side. There was a Pottawatomie atmosphere everywhere. It even reached the lungs of the dignified old National Intelligencer, which from its lofty position gave us an editorial puff. We were in all thoughts and on all tongues. Never before or since has an Indian delegation at Washington been so much talked about and so heartily sympathised with.

“Major,” said Capt. Sire to me, “if you pay for a single dozen of oysters, or a bottle of wine, while we are in Washington, I'll make it a personal matter, sir.”

Col. Ewing was highly amused, and acknowledged that my 'atmosphere' was just the thing to waft us onward in our treaty making enterprise; and told me that when I should get back to St. Louis, and get out my 'shingle', as a lawyer, I must consider myself as engaged by the year as attorney for the firm of W. G. & G. W. Ewing. He even took back all he had said about the “goggles,” and insisted on making the acquaintance of Dr. Wallace, of the New York Herald, who wore the glasses.

The Press had been used but in that unsophisticated age not a dollar had been paid to any writer, as all were glad of the chance to write about Indians; and not a line was printed that was not substantially true. From prudence as well as principle, the Indians and myself gave out only facts, and we had thus no dread of detection or exposure.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The narrative takes place in 1845.

Information regarding Richard Smith Elliot is found in Nicholas T. Joost, "The Traveler as Antihero: Richard Smith Elliot in the Mexican War," in Steven E. Kagel, *America: Exploration and Travel* (Madison, Popular Press, 1979): 83–91.

A brief profile of Fitzgibbon, with wood engraving portrait illustration, is found in "J. H. Fitzgibbon, of St. Louis," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York) 4:92 (5 September 1857): 213.¹ A notice of Fitzgibbon's death is found in "Died of Heart Disease," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* 8:87 (15 August 1882): 10.²

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8570002_FITZGIBBON_BIO_LESLIES_1857-09-05.pdf

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8820001_FITZG_STL-GLOBE-DEM_1882-08-15.pdf

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