

George H. Devol, "The Daguerrotype Boat," 1887

(keywords: floating daguerreotype gallery, "daguerrotype boat," history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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George H. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi* (Cincinnati: Devol & Haines, 1887): 49–50.

THE DAGUERROTYPE BOAT.

“Good heaven! that sots and knaves should be so vain,
To wish their vile remembrance may remain
And stand recorded at their own request,
To future days a libel or a jest.”

Before the war, “Eph” Holland, my partner Alexander, and myself were waiting for a boat at the mouth of the Red River. There was a little boat lying at the landing, nicely fitted up for a daguerrotype gallery, and I proposed to the boys that we have our pictures taken all together, and I would pay for it, as I thought it would make a pretty group. They agreed, so we went on board the boat and let the artist take us all in a bunch. Holland was in the middle, and the picture flattered him; so he insisted on having a dozen copies. I saw that the picture did not do me justice, so I wanted “Eph” to sit alone, telling him it would cost less. He said he would pay the bill, for he could see it was the contrast that showed him off to so great an advantage. Well, to please him we let the artist draw a bead on us eleven times more; for at that time they could only take one picture at a shot. Holland paid the entire bill, which was so large that I asked the daguerrotype man if he would sell out. “Oh, no; I am making too much money,” says he. Then I thought, I will try and get some of it; at least the amount that poor “Eph” had paid for his vanity. I told the old story of how I had lost my money, and began to throw the cards. I soon had them guessing; Alexander turned up the corner of the winner, and then bet me \$100 that the artist could turn it. I took him up, and lost the money. The artist got excited and wanted to bet his money. The result was, I won all he had, and told him I would give him a chance to get even, and would bet all he had lost against his boat and contents. He accepted the proposition. Holland made out a bill of sale, the artist signed it, and in a short time he had lost his home and business. Then I said to him: “You have played in bad luck, so I will pay you a salary to manage the business for me.” He accepted the employment. We bid him good bye, and took a boat for New Orleans. Two weeks later I saw my picture boat at Bayou Sara. I went on board, and my employee was glad to see me (or at least he said he was). I asked him about the business, and he told me he was losing money; so I told him I would like to sell out. He wanted to know my price; I told him \$150. He offered me \$40 cash and his note for the balance; so I thought, as he had been losing money for two weeks, I had better sell. I have his note yet, and the first time I see Holland I am going to try and sell it to him. There was no money in the business for me, as it was outside of my

line; and I have come to the conclusion that a man should stick to his legitimate business. "Eph" Holland was sorry afterward that he ever had his picture taken in a group, for the next time he went to New Orleans he was arrested on the street and taken to the Chief's office, and there he saw his "group" picture in the rogues' gallery. He tried to explain how it was that his picture came to be grouped with two well known horse-thieves, but the Chief couldn't see it. Then Eph sent for his friends, who went on his bond, and he was let off until the next morning. As he and his friends were leaving the Chief's office he caught sight of me, and then he "dropped," and said to me, "George, you gave that picture to the chief." I said, "What picture?" Then Eph said, "Boys, come on; it's all on me." The Chief joined us; and when Eph had settled the bill, he said to me, "George, the next time I have my picture taken I will go it alone." I said to him, "Eph, all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

It is said that Devol won around two million dollars over his forty years as an active gambler, but died penniless. Biographical information regarding Devol is provided by John O. West in an introduction to the 1996 Steck-Vaughn Company facsimile reprint of this title. The introduction provides this obituary for Devol from the 9 July 1903 *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans):

George Devol, probably the most noted gambler of the old Mississippi River days, is dead. He passed away in Hot Springs last Saturday.

He was generally known in this city. He had lived here, and of late spent his winters here. Ever since the building of the New St. Charles Hotel, George Devol had been a familiar figure about the cafe every winter. He told his stories and recited the thrilling incidents of the days when the Mississippi was at its prime.

In antebellum days Devol made a fortune gambling on Mississippi River steamers. He retired and lived on its income very comfortably for many years, but in recent years he had spent the last portion of it and at the time of his death he was engaged in selling books in the Arkansas resort (principal among them being his own work, "Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi"). This book was widely circulated here, and many hold copies of it.

The narrative is a personal one, and tells the reader of the life of the famous gambler on the great river. He lived on the boat and played poker with the rich planters who traveled up and down the stream.

A daguerreotype boat is mentioned in the April 1856 diary entries of Mary E. Bateman. See *Diary, 1856*, in the Mary E. Bateman Diary #47-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.¹

See also "Daguerreotyping on the Mississippi," *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* (New York) 8:7 (August 1855): 252-53.²

1. http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/b/Bateman,Mary_E.html

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8550003_DAG-MISS_PFAJ_1855-08.pdf

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