

“A Large Wagon,” (regarding William Shew), three texts from July 1851

(keywords: William Shew, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Three related texts published in:

Daily Alta California (San Francisco) 2:217 (16 July 1851): n.p. (second page of issue).

A LARGE WAGON.—A wagon body is standing upon the Plaza, taking up a very large portion of it, the object of which is a matter of some considerable speculation. It is at least thirty feet long, and must be intended to cart about the Elephant or some other large California animal.

Daily Alta California (San Francisco) 2:223 (22 July 1851): n.p. (second page of issue).

THE BIG WAGON.—A good deal of curiosity has been expressed in regard to the object and intention of the big wagon which fills up a large portion of the Plaza, and which was yesterday being covered with a frame. Some supposed that “the elephant,” which so many people come here to see, was to be caged up in it and exhibited to greenhorns at a quarter a sight—others that it was to be a travelling rum-mill, and a variety of other things. It seems, however, that it is to be a travelling daguerreotype establishment, with which the proprietor intends to travel around the city and country, taking views and portraits. This is, to say the least, a very novel idea, and one which will doubtless bring its originator quite a pile.

Daily Alta California (San Francisco) 2:229 (28 July 1851): n.p. (second page of issue).

THE DAGUERRETYPE CARAVAN.—The remarkable structure in process of erection upon the Plaza, has excited no little curiosity as to the purpose to which it is to be appropriated. The mystery has at length been solved, and the cat liberated from the bag. The slanderous report that it was the property of the enterprising proprietor of the highly intelligent double-breasted pig, has been proven entirely without foundation, equally with the rumors that it was for a “wan” for the exhibition of a wax show of Jenkins and Stuart, or a private coach for the use of Jenny Lind upon her arrival. The truth of the matter is, that an ingenious daguerreotypist, who had become quite disgusted with the unnecessary and disagreeable application of intense caloric, as rather destructive to the prosecution of his business, had conceived the idea of pushing along and keeping moving on wheels. We suppose that it is his intention in the event of a fire, to hitch up his team and put for other latitudes. His purpose is to travel through the principal portions of

the country, and obtain views of various prominent places and scenes, as well as take likenesses. The idea is a very excellent one, and the exhibition will be highly interesting. There are some places we wot of, where it will be rather dragging on the animals who will “propel” the van, and the “snapper” will have to be employed on divers occasions, as a motive power. The originality of the enterprise deserves success, and we hope that the projector will obtain plenty of dust with which to grease his wheels and keep the machine on the track.

[End of texts.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The wagon was built for the daguerreotypist William Shew. Shew arrived in San Francisco 4 March 1851 aboard the steamer Tennessee.¹

K. M. Nesfield, writing in 1903, states that “from New York he [Shew] dispatched his perambulating gallery and its equipments around the Horn, coming himself by the shorter Isthmus route.”²

O. V. Lange, writing in 1905 (a year prior to the death of Shew), adds that Shew had the wagon shipped to San Francisco for the reason of “anticipating a scarcity of suitable facilities.”³ The latter of these three texts seems to differ with Lange’s assertion and alludes to the frequency of fire as being Shew’s reason for constructing a moveable saloon.

As inferred by the *Alta California*, the size of the wagon seems to preclude its practicality for travel on California’s terrain. Shew himself refers to the wagon as the “moveable” rather than “traveling.”⁴ The present editor knows of no contemporary reference regarding movement of the wagon outside of the Plaza area.

In September, Shew proposed to lease space on the Plaza but was refused; he subsequently moved the wagon onto an empty lot on Washington Street (opposite the Plaza) adjacent to the office of the *Alta California* newspaper.⁵

A half-plate daguerreotype depicting Shew (presumably) and his wagon is in the collection of the Oakland Museum of California and is viewable on their web site.⁶

It is likely that the wagon was later used by George R. Fardon. See Rodger C. Birt [et al.], *San Francisco Album: Photographs, 1854-1856, by George Robinson Fardon* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999): 17–18 (figure 3). In figure 3, the wagon is turned 180 degrees (opposite the Oakland Museum daguerreotype view) and shows the wagon’s sidelight window.

Additional information regarding Shew is found in Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840-1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000): 496–99; Wendy Cunkle Calmenson, “Likenesses Taken in the Most Approved Style: William Shew, Pioneer Daguerreotypist,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* (San Francisco) 56:1 (Spring 1977): 2–19.

1. “Passengers,” *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco) 2:86 (5 March 1851): n.p. (second page of issue).
2. K. M. Nesfield, “The First Photographer in San Francisco and Some of His Early-day Patrons,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (3 May 1903): “Sunday Supplement” page 4.
3. O. V. Lange, “A Portrait Photographer for More than Half a Century in San Francisco,” *Camera Craft* (San Francisco) 5:3 (July 1902): 101–2.
4. “Improved Daguerreotypes,” (advertisement) *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco) 2:314 (22 October 1851): n.p. (third page of issue).
5. “Daguerreotype Drawings,” *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco) 2:298 (6 October 1851): n.p. (second page of issue).

6. <http://museumca.org/photo/william-shew-untitled-shews-daguerreian-saloon-1851-gift-mr-and-mrs-willard-m-nott-and-dr-paul>

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