

**Two texts by John F. Fitzgibbon, "Daguerreotyping in the Back-woods,"
and "The 'Arkansaw Traveller' Daguerreotyped," November 1854**

(keywords: John F. Fitzgibbon, Arkansaw Traveler, Arkansas Traveler, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Published in:

Photographic and Fine-Art Journal (New York) 7:11 (November 1854): 324–26.

DAGUERREOTYPING IN THE BACK-WOODS.

Transcribed from a Daguerreotypists' Journal.

"That's the chap—him with the white hat, fat and short like our old sow. Stand back, boys, and let me talk to the image man. Hello stranger, are you him?"

"Whom do you mean, my friend?"

"Well, now, I didn't say I was your friend, but, howsever, we wants to know if you are the Doggeritytype man that sent them big bills out here—hold on, I'll show you one on 'em," at the same time diving his hand into his coat-tail, he pulled out one of my large posters.

"I profess to be the artist, gentlemen, and shall be at your service shortly."

"Bill, you here them big words? Send for Caleb's larnin book till we know what he's comin over us."

Such was the reception I received at a small town called Sovereignville, near the borders of Missouri, Arkansas, and the Cherokee Nation. The crowd consisted of a motley group of half-breeds and whites of both sexes, that came crowding round as I alighted from my wooden elliptic spring wagon.

Shortly afterwards I took a stroll over the town. It was what is generally denominated a "one horse town," and I would think a tolerably small pony at that. Two stores, one grocery, a stable, and four dwellings, made up the sum of its buildings. I was searching for a room for operations, and in passing I was accosted by an old chap with "what are you a hunting for, stranger?"

"Nothing but light," I replied.

"Why, you're not blind, I don't think; I see plenty of light."

"You don't understand me, my friend. I am looking for a room suitable for taking daguerreotype pictures in,—a room with a good light."

"Oh, I reckon you's the great little man what's a gwine to take off our heads with a chimera. Maybe I can fix you off,—my darter Polly's got a bed-room. Polly can gin up her bed and sleep on a pallet. You won't take pictures by night, will you, stranger?"

"No, not Daguerreotypes."

"Well, Polly axed me when you come to get her fizzyogerny took, so you must close the bargain with her 'bout the room."

Polly and myself soon "struck a trade," and I began arrangements for operations. In the course of a few hours I announced myself as ready to take likenesses of all that

wished them. In a short time my room was crowded. All the cases for exhibition on the table were opened and re-opened a thousand times; the contents of my trunk turned over and over, the camera scrutinized before and behind. Thinks I this is all talk and no cider; and I asked if there was any lady or gentleman present that wanted a picture? A dead silence ensued; then a titter. At length one of the chaps spoke up to his sweetheart, "Betse, spose you have your pretty taken."

"No, Bill, you front the glass awile, and see how it works on you."

"I golly," says Bill, "I'll try it. Is thar any danger of the machines' bustin, stranger? I've heard you've got an all-fired lot of chemicals and acids in thar."

"No danger in the world, sir. All you have to do is to keep still for a few seconds." I then began to place him in position—

"Hold on here, stranger, none of your steel traps and triggers 'bout my head."

"Softly, my friend, I am only placing your head in the rest for the purpose of keeping you steady."

"Hold on, I tell you, you're not a gwine to screw me up: I'm not the sort to be screwed, I can tell you, and if you don't quit, I'll slope."

I then explained as distinctly as I could the nature of the operation, and Bill became easy. His position was taken again, and I was just about to draw the slide from the plate when he cried out, "Betse, whar's the meal bag?"

"Keep very still and quiet now, if you please," said I.

"Whar's the meal bag, Betse?" cried Bill again. "stranger, thar was a dogerytype man here from Maysville, that made Reuben Frother's face right black on one side, and several of their faces black the same way. Now me and Betse fetched the meal bag along to whiten one side of our faces, so when the machine works on us we'll be the same thing on both sides." So slap, slap, went the meal bag on the side of his face, and Bill "agreed to be dratted if both sides wouldn't be white now." I said not a word—in fact I was amused beyond laughing, and quietly carried on the process. The whole crowd had great faith in the meal bag arrangement. The artist who had visited them had indeed only given them half pictures.

In a few moments the picture was produced. I did not show it to my sitter, for the reason that I hold it for Barnum, who when he beholds it will dance, shed tears of joy, and thenceforth regard me as his Magnus Apollo, his greatest benefactor.

After a good deal of trouble, I explained to my patrons that the black pictures were not the result of the camera but of the operator, and that I would produce them pictures as white as they wanted.

At another trial (without the meal bag) I succeeded in a fine likeness of Bill, who exclaimed, on seeing it, "Stranger, you're the greatest dogman that's bin in these parts. Jump in here, Betse, and let's have you."

Betse sat down, and Bill wanted to look at her through the instrument.—I permitted him, as soon as I got the focus adjusted.

"Look out, stranger," said Bill, when he peeped in, "your noggin's in danger. Turn that hogany box over, Betse is bottom upwards. I don't 'low sich jokes as this stranger. Betse aint to be turned up that way. Over with her!"

"My friend, says I, Miss Betsey is in no danger. Her position is caused by the instrument," and after a considerable explanation, convinced him that I was not intending to make game of his girl.

Betse's likeness was obtained, "right side up," and Bill was overjoyed.—The crowd was highly pleased, and went away as the sun declined, with the promise to devote to-

morrow to my services; and I thought that night as I cast myself, wearied with the day's exertions, on my bed, "Jordan is a hard road to travel."

THE "ARKANSAW TRAVELER" DAGUERREOTYPED.

Who has not heard of the famous "Arkansaw [Arkansas—ed.] Traveler?" What would I not give, thought I, if I could only get his physiognomy for my gallery? I had been traveling in south-west Missouri, north-west Arkansas, and the Indian Nation, on a professional tour.

I had often asked the question, who is the 'Arkansaw Traveler?' and had never heard it answered. His occupation, his residence, his habits, were all mysterious. He was ubiquitous in his movements, as hard to be found as the man that struck Billy Patterson, yet celebrated everywhere.

Whilst at Nesho, in Missouri, a small town about thirty miles from the Arkansas line, I gathered from expressions that dropped from divers persons, that he had been there, and that he had left with a Cherokee named Albery for a great ball-play that was to take place near the line of the Cherokee, Osage, and Seneca Nations. I determined to follow on, thinking I might be enabled to operate there successfully, and obtain perhaps the picture I so much desired.

I arrived upon the ground. The sun was retiring to his bed of grass behind a beautiful green knoll, far in the great ocean prairie that stretched limitless to the west. The hum of voices arose on all sides; herds of ponies were grazing on the plain; the smoke of camp fires were rising like pillars of clouds to the heaven; night came on, and I retired to my pallet on the ground and anxiously wished for the morrow.

It came, and all nature was astir. Horses were scampering and neighing on all sides. The language of four Nations was heard, and that of the Osages rose high above the rest, as they howled their morning prayers to the sun. A faint south breeze and a cloudless sky, betokened a scorching day.

As yet the scene was indescribably beautiful. The shade of the walnut grove where I had encamped, was thrown far out upon the prairie; the waters of the rivulet that ran from the spring in the grove, ran dancing, and sparkling in the new sun-beams.

I looked upon the savages that were encamped along the stream. In a few short years they would all be gathered to their fathers. Step by step they have receded from the advance of the pale faces. Hunting ground after hunting ground has been assigned them, and they now scarce dare look eastward lest they should see the frontiersman's cabin rise up before their eyes.

One group encamped upon the ground particularly engrossed my attention. A few naked, half-starved wretches, chiefs of one tribe, were listening to the wily words of a sleek, fat half-breed, who, caring nought for the blood in his veins except that it served to keep life in him, sought to impress the great value of the pittance offered by our Government for the land of their fathers, and this too in the face of the thousands and millions of acres of wild unoccupied lands within the bounds of the United States surveys.

But to my object. I had as yet seen nothing of the "Traveler," and I strolled throughout the encampment in search of him. I was not successful. The play was about to commence. The Osages and Senecas were matched against the Cherokees—one hundred chosen warriors of the latter against a like number of their adversaries. Yelling like

fiends, stamping and shouting at every bound, they rushed up, naked, to the dividing line of the two parties. They gave a salutation of defiance. The ball was cast high in the air. Slap, bang, thump, whoop—there flies the ball—out it goes, the Cherokees made the first count. And so it continued throughout that sultry day till late in the afternoon, when Senecas and Osages threw up their sticks, and acknowledged the Cherokee's conquerors.

As I passed from the scene of the play back to my camp, I paused to listen to the sound of a fiddle, upon whose strings some hand was "jerking a nasty bow." There was a dance going on, at the place whence the music came. Six or eight young Cherokee half-breed girls were hoeing it down with lusty might, faced by three sturdy partners of the same tribe.

As I drew nearer I saw the Arkansaw Traveler. I knew him at a glance. There needed no hand to point him out. He was standing elevated on the stump of a lone tree that some of the campers had cut down. Just as I got up to the crowd he finished his tune and descended for a "horn." I immediately approached him, told him I was a daguerreotypist, and requested his picture.

"Colonel," said he, "I've no time for pictering. I'm a goin' to git up on that stump agin, and expect to fiddle there for half an hour. If you can get anything out of me when I'm up there you can do so."

I was but a short distance from my instrument and materials. I immediately went to them, prepared a plate, and returned to the dance. The fiddle was ringing with extra life. The Arkansaw Traveler was playing his own tune, the Arkansaw Traveler, and the girls were hopping higher than ever.

"You've got back, Colonel," said the Traveler.

"Yes sir, and am ready now to begin operations," said I.

(Hands round, gals!)

"Colonel, I don't vally pictures much. Howmsoever, if you can git anything from me as I go along, you're welcome to it. (Down the middle Sakee and Jack!) I wound'nt stop this tune now if General Jackson was to come along and want to take my image. (Dance to head!) Picters can't show the innard man, (turn partner!) that's the part I vally; (shave it down!) Why don't you let loose, Colonel? (All hands take seats on the log!)

The tune was over, and the Traveler descended. I advanced cautiously towards my object and explained to him why and how much I would appreciate the likeness of so noted a character. He finally consented to sit. I arranged his position on the stump, and succeeded in getting a brilliant, precious likeness. I have it in my gallery. It may be known by its peculiarities, at a glance. A splendid buckskin hunting shirt, variegated and ornamented with many colored silks and several rows of broad fringe, a red calico shirt, black cloth pantaloons, a red sash, a Kossuth slouched hat and beaded moccasins—these formed his dress when he sat for my camera. His countenance I need not, cannot describe. But as it appears, hanging among the specimens of my gallery, I regard it as one of the most remarkable heads of the day.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Please see the disclaimer below regarding derogatory terms used in these texts.

Although the articles are unsigned, an editor's note in the same issue (page 352) identifies the author as John F. Fitzgibbon:

“—Mr. Fitzgibbon has returned from his tour among the backwoodsmen of Western Missouri and Arkansas. . . Two of his sketches of life in the woods will be found in the present number.”

The first of the two articles was reprinted in Gibbon-Fitz [pseud. John Fitzgibbon], “Old Times: Daguerreotyping in the Backwoods,” *Photographic News: a Weekly Record of the Progress of Photography* (London) 21:992 (7 September 1877): 423.

See also J. H. Fitzgibbon, “Daguerreotyping,” *Western Journal, of Agriculture, Manufactures, Mechanic Arts, Internal Improvements, Commerce, and General Literature* (St. Louis) 6:3 (June 1851): 200–3;¹ J. H. Fitzgibbon, “Daguerreotypeing Simplified,” 6:6 (September 1851): 380–85.²

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): 213.³ See also the profile, “Fitzgibbon’s Gallery,” J. N. Taylor and M. O. Crooks, *Sketch Book of Saint Louis*. (St. Louis: George Knapp & Co., 1858): 311–14.⁴

A three-stanza memorial poem for Fitzgibbon is in Richard Smith Elliott, *Notes Taken in Sixty Years* (St. Louis: R. P. Studley & Co., 1883): 204.⁵

William Quesenbury describes his visit to the Fitzgibbon gallery in “Trip to St. Louis,” *South-West Independent* (Fayetteville, AK) 2:46 3 August 1855.

Additional information regarding Fitzgibbon is found in Bonnie Wright, “‘This Perpetual Shadow-Taking’: The Lively Art of John Fitzgibbon,” *Missouri Historical Review* 76:1 (October 1981): 22–30; Delores A. Kilgo, “Fitzgibbon, John (1817–1882),” Lawrence O. Christensen, edit. *Dictionary of Missouri Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999): 301–2; Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide: A Biographical Dictionary, 1839–1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005): 254–59.

Additional information regarding the “Arkansas Traveler,” is found an entry on the Central Arkansas Public Library web page, *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*.⁶

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510017_FITZ_DAG-TYPING_1851-06.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8510018_FITZ_DAG-SIMPLIFIED_1851-09.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8570002_FITZGIBBON_BIO_LESLIES_1857-09-05.pdf
4. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8580003_SKETCH-BOOK_FITZGIBBON_1858.pdf
5. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/B8830001_ELLIOTT_SIXTY-YEARS_1883.pdf
6. <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=505>

EWER ARCHIVE P8540007

URL: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8540007_FITZ-BACKWOODS_PFAJ_1854-11.doc

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2010-06-28 / Last revision (proofread/edit): 2011-06-06

Citation information: *Photographic and Fine-Art Journal* (New York) 7:11 (November 1854): 324–26.

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