

**Edward L. Allen, "Old Times," February 1870**

(keywords: Edward L. Allen, Albert Sands Southworth, Josiah Johnson Hawes, Marcus Ormsbee, George M. Silsbee, John Adams Whipple, James Wallace Black, Austin Augustus Turner, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Published in:

*Philadelphia Photographer* 7:74 (February 1870): 46–48.

### OLD TIMES.

AT the November meeting of the *Boston Photographic Association*, our friend, Mr. E. L. Allen, read a little sketch of his past experiences, which tells a story so interesting to all that we must multiply it. There are very few arts or professions which have been carried to such perfection as ours has, whose pioneers are still living in numbers. Photography is young but great. Every day nearly, we meet some one who, with unmistakable pride, will swell up his breast, hit it a thump, and say: "*I made Daguerreotypes twenty years ago.*" We appreciate the feeling, and it is not wrong to indulge it. You who can say so have much to be proud of. You have been identified with the greatest and most useful of the arts since its birth. You have seen the infant's struggles for life; fought with it during its childhood, but oh! who can expect to live to see it in its *manhood*? None of us, we expect. Think of a first-class operator working for \$4 per week now?

But Mr. Allen must be heard:

MR. PRESIDENT: My only excuse for coming before you in this way to-night, is an earnest desire to see these meetings flourish, and not because I think I can tell you anything very interesting.

But unless we make some individual effort, as we were told last month, we may expect to see our meetings dwindle away, and the Society itself become of none effect. And if this ever happens, it will be our own fault, for I know we have here good material, we are well officered, our meetings are dignified and well conducted. We have among us some good photographers, men of experience, who, if they will put a shoulder to the wheel, will make those meetings so interesting, that to miss one will be "worse than having a tooth pulled," as the young ladies say to us when they come to be photographed.

I told you last month I had read a report of the previous meeting in the English journals, then at hand. That was a mistake. It was the June meeting. However the fact stands. We were reported, and to the extent of a column, which I thought gave us a prominence that we must work to maintain. It will never do to fail, with our English cousins looking at us.

We were not all born orators nor yet good photographers, but we can all learn something, and I am sure these meetings will be the best aid we ever had, if we only use them. I know that to-day we are making better pictures in Boston than we were a year ago. And I attribute the fact to the influence of this and the National Association. I feel it,

and I doubt not others of you do. At the same time you must remember we are hardly yet started.

And here I wish to qualify a remark made at last meeting, when I called the photographic part of the late Mechanics' Exhibition abominable. That was rather harsh and unfair, as one of the principal contributors was not here.

But I am not going to take back what I then said, only qualify it. It is not too much to say that some of the productions (I can't call them pictures), there exhibited were abominable. And at the same time there were some good things there, among which I must mention a 7 x 9 of Edward Everett Hale and his little boy, made in imitation of the engraving where a father is teaching his son to plough, and which pleased me more than anything else I saw, from its close resemblance to the engraving. Of course I except the foreign products.

But taken altogether, the Exhibition was far short of what it ought to have been for Boston. I will venture the assertion the next one will see a very different display; especially if business remains as it has been the last few weeks, as there will then be nothing to prevent us devoting our whole energies to that object.

Something has been said of biographical sketches being introduced. They would no doubt be very interesting, but should be used as a sort of dessert after the substantials have been disposed of, else those who are watching us from over the water, may think we are not so deep in chemistry as we ought to be, or not so well posted in photography.

I am proud to say I have been in the ranks of picture makers in the most palmy days of the business, when our friends Messrs. Southworth & Hawes were making the most beautiful daguerreotypes ever produced in the world. When the firm of Ormsbee & Silsbee were on the corner of Bromfield and Washington Streets, and with whom I commenced my career, at a salary of \$4 per week, after paying \$50 to learn the business, which occupied four weeks.

At the end of a year my wages were doubled. This was considered a pretty good thing, and immediately led to a matrimonial engagement, which still continues, but not on \$8 per week.

At this time nothing was known of photographs on this side the ocean. We got our living altogether by the peerless daguerreotype. Soon the crystalotype began to be talked of, and Messrs. Whipple & Black were its pioneers in the New World. Our friend Ormsbee, who at that early day possessed some of the spirit of later times, and was bound not to be left behind, sent the late A. A. Turner to Messrs. Whipple & Black to learn the new process. This occupied but a short time, when one of Ormsbee's handsome rooms was dismantled and fitted for a work-room.

Mr. Turner, at the commencement, was obliged to make daily visits to Messrs. Whipple & Black's to procure his chemicals, as the formula were not to be passed till Mr. T. had signed a contract to work a certain time at a certain rate of wages to pay his tuition. But the hero of a hundred swindles proved too smart for poor Ormsbee. Somehow he discovered the secret, and had him completely in his power. The contract papers were all made out, and were to be signed by Mr. T.'s father as bondsman, who lived at Bath, Me., and were carried there for that purpose by his hopeful son, but they never came back.

Ormsbee had been at the expense of fitting up, and was obliged to make the best of a bad bargain. Turner soon produced some of the best pictures that had been made, but would be on a strike every few weeks till his salary reached \$86 per week. This was too much for those times, and soon burst the establishment.

Turner went to New York, and in the course of a year or two the collodion process came up. This he soon became master of, and aspired to a trip to Paris. In order to raise funds for this, he offered to teach a few pupils at the low charge of \$30 each. I was one of the number, and for this purpose went to New York and came back within a week fully posted. It displeased Ormsbee very much that I went to New York instead of going to Messrs. Whipple & Black's (who had of course kept pace with the times, and could teach as much as anybody knew), and learn on his account, but I knew what that meant, and preferred to be on my own hook. On my return from New York, he took me back at a salary of \$18 per week. I had worked for him up to the time of going at \$10. The burst establishment had been repaired as well as possible after Turner left.

This was a big jump, from \$10 to \$18, and I have a faint recollection of conscientious scruples at the time. In fact, when I look back, I wonder how I had the impudence to impose so much upon anybody. I really knew nothing.

To commence I made a silver bath. My kind friend to whom I had given the \$50, had generously furnished me with a bottle of collodion to bring back, so I was saved the trouble of making this, and it was a trouble in those days, as we had to make our own cotton, which generally came out good once in about ten trials.

In my bath I put, as near as I can recollect, about one ounce of nitric acid, having forgotten to note down the exact quantity required. This, I need hardly tell you, did not work to my entire satisfaction, and as I supposed it lacked acid, added a couple of ounces more. This I found did not improve matters, and I was in a terrible fix, expecting to lose my situation, when my good friend Turner came along on a farewell visit to Boston before he crossed the ocean. When I heard he was in town I made haste to see him, and find out what the trouble was. He soon set me right, and I have not been so badly stuck since.

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Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2010-07-13 / Last revision (proofread): 2010-07-16

Citation information: *Philadelphia Photographer* 7:74 (February 1870): 46–48.

Prepared from: photocopy from an original volume.

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