

James Wallace Black, "Days Gone By," July 1877

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[For the St. Louis Practical Photographer.]

DAYS GONE BY.

BY J. W. BLACK.

Friend Fitz.: You ask me to write you some of my recollections of our early experiments in the photographer's art. I have delayed doing so as I am not used to putting my thoughts in writing, and my experience would be a reproduction of what you and many others have been through, as old Daguerreotypers. You remember when your utmost efforts were made to produce a Daguerreotype without shadows, and a white shirt bosom. As I remember, the secret of this was held only by a few, and they guarded it jealously. As we look back on those old times, it is amusing to think how simple were the means to the end, and yet how far away they seemed. My first instruction in daguerreotyping was from Mr. John Leroy, about 1845; at the same time experiments were being made on the sewing machine—since a great success, but at that time thought an impossibility. These two branches were prosecuted in the same room. I remember thinking how impossible it must be to sew by machinery, and I as little thought of the wide range photography would eventually take, as subsequent events have proved. I had better have devoted my time to sewing machines than to daguerreotyping. We used a common window side light, with a large mirror for reflected light, the object being to get a fair outline with the face as white as possible, and also the shirt front. At the present day few know of the manual labor and pains bestowed to produce these results. At that time they were wonderful, and the fact of being able to secure a reflection of light was almost as incredible as the telephone of the present day, when it is proved that the vibrations of the human voice can be made to be distinctly heard hundreds of miles away, as demonstrated by Prof. Bell. It would take too long to enter into the details of an almost lost art (daguerreotyping); but I must say it is one of the best types of sun pictures ever made, and if we were practicing it now, with our present knowledge, meagre as it is, would produce magnificent results. There was a charm about reproducing an object by this means that brought many persons to practice it who were perfectly ignorant of the first principles of light and shade. Consequently, the results were only a faint likeness, without any pretensions to artistic merit. Even at this late day, some of my old

daguerreotypes are brought to me to reproduce that I blush to look at—in fact, not much more than an outline. The first men to practically show us that we must know something of composition and light and shade was the firm of Southworth & Hawes. They certainly, at that time, took the lead, and made some of the most exquisite results—only the profession had not the cultivation to appreciate them. I have known those men to devote days to producing what they considered a good likeness, and many of their productions are to-day unequaled. Many very amusing stories could be told of the tricks of the trade at that time.

Following Messrs. Southworth & Hawes, came Mr. Whipple, in Boston, and several in New York—Gurney, Brady and others, all of more or less excellence. Mr. Whipple and myself were connected in business for several years, and I shall have more to say about him by and by on the introduction of the Chrystelotype [crystalotype—ed.]. About this time, Mr. L. Hale, a prominent artist on Washington street, then connected with Mr. Benj. French, was making some of the brightest and well developed daguerreotypes known at that day. It was considered a great secret; but it was only using the developing or mercury bath at a high temperature. And another improvement consisted in using rotary buffs to polish the silvered plate. These machines were kept carefully hid in a room by themselves, and it took \$50 or \$100 to see them. Many other inventions, too numerous to mention, were made an article of traffic to the many country and city operators, who admired the superior production. One of the most notable was what was called dry-quick, a preparation of bromide and lime. Hundred of amusing anecdotes could be told of the many dupes to the as many humbugs. At the time Jenny Lind was in Boston, Mr. Hale bought the second choice of seats to her first concert for several hundred dollars. Afterwards he made daguerreotypes of her. I made for him many copies 4-4 size. So famous was this picture at that time that the chair she sat in was sold for many times its value. Amusing things often took place in the studio, Mr. Hale being fond of a joke. Once I remember a country operator coming in, struck with the work, enquired the cause; says Mr. Hale, it is entirely due to keeping the bromide bath cool, you know the cooling properties of the potato, so I simply put one in the bath—the countryman went away entirely satisfied. On another occasion some one insisted on sitting very late in the afternoon, and for fun they placed the sitter in the chair, saying it would take considerable time. Leaving him there, they went to supper, and on returning they found him faithful to his trust; and to continue the joke, they produced a picture of an exceedingly plain-looking man. It is needless to say it was not satisfactory, and at a convenient time a good one was made. In a future article I will continue some of the reminiscences, if you think that they will prove interesting to your readers.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Additional information regarding Black is found in Sally Pierce, *Whipple and Black: Commercial Photographers in Boston* (Boston: The Boston Athenaeum, 1987).

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