

“An Old-Time Photographer and His Reminiscences,” October 1894

(keywords: Mathew B. Brady, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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An Old-Time Photographer and His Reminiscences.

In the history of the lives of men there are few that possess more interest than those of older workers in photography. An interview with Mr. M. B. Brady, by a representative of *The Washington Evening Star*, is full of interest.

“I took up photography,” said Brady, “shortly after Daguerre made an artist of the sun, and my purpose ever since and all my tastes and energies have been devoted to advancing that branch of art in America. My first associate in the study of photography was Prof. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, and I shall never forget our researches and experiments, and the disappointments that overwhelmed us, one after another. Diligence, however, always proves the greatest factor in success, and it was not long before I was well established in my profession. My first gallery was in New York, and old-timers will tell you what a central point of attraction ‘Brady’s’ was forty years ago. Well-to-do visitors to New York deemed it a proper thing to come to me to have their pictures taken and to look at the collection of distinguished people whose faces looked out from my walls, and when I established a gallery in Washington the same custom prevailed here.

“‘What distinguished people have I photographed?’ you ask. I was almost going to tell you to take the list of all the men who have obtained national prominence in this country, and all the distinguished foreigners who have visited it in the last fifty years, and use it for an answer. They all came to me, and I can see them in my mind’s eye, like a procession of ghosts, passing in review.

RECOLLECTIONS OF FAMOUS PEOPLE.

“‘Tell you something about the characteristics of the great people who sat for me?’ repeated Mr. Brady. “Well, I can only skim here and there over the pond, so to speak. There was Henry Clay. He sat to me in New York in the forties. He was easy enough to manage when you got to him, but he was the most difficult man to secure for a sitting I have ever known.

“I made my first picture of Daniel Webster in New York in 1848. He was as courteous and as pliable as it was possible for man to be. ‘Use me as the potter would the clay, Mr. Brady,’ he said to me, and he was more than pleased with the result.

“My first picture of Lincoln was made in New York in 1858, on the day before he made his famous Cooper Institute speech. He was full of fun in the gallery, as genial as a summer day, and teeming with reminiscence. One day, after he was elected President,

Ward Lamon, who was marshal of the district, met me at the White House, and started to introduce me to Mr. Lincoln. 'Don't introduce me to Brady,' ejaculated the President, 'I know him, Lamon. Why, man, his picture of me and my Cooper Institute speech made me President.'

"The first negative I ever took of Gen. Grant was attended with exciting incidents," continued Mr. Brady. "It was the day after he came from the West to Washington to take command of the army of the Potomac. It was a cloudy afternoon and rather dark in the gallery, so I sent an assistant, who was a German, upon the roof to take the tarpaulin covering off the plate glass sky light. Grant was seated before the camera immediately beneath the light. In his attempt to get off the tarpaulin my assistant slipped and fell on the glass, breaking it in innumerable pieces and falling through to his waist. The glass fell all around Gen. Grant in a shower, and if any of it had struck him it would have injured him severely, because it was an eighth of an inch thick, and the pieces were as large or larger than a dinner plate. Grant never changed color or moved a muscle, save to look up and see the man's legs hanging through, His only movement of countenance was a slight drawing up of the nostrils; that was all. Secretary Stanton was white. He grasped me by the arm, pulled me into the dark-room and whispered: "For God's sake don't let this get out to the papers. It would look like a design to kill the General.'

WAR PHOTOGRAPHS.

"Ah! Yes," said Mr. Brady with a sigh, "those were stirring times and full of incidents. I was the first man to take a camera on the battle field and make it the historian of war. Many years ago the War Department purchased a large number of negatives that I took during the war and they have been largely used in illustrating the works issued from time to time by the government. 'Did I ever photograph Gen. Lee?' Oh, yes! I performed what was considered an impossible feat in photography, with Gen. Lee as a subject, on the day after his surrender at Appomattox. In the rear of his own house at Richmond I took twelve negatives of Gen. Lee in an hour, a performance in the art which was then considered impossible. Over 20,000 copies of that photograph was sold in a short time."—*Photographic Times*.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This text was reprinted in *St. Louis & Canadian Photographer: a Journal Devoted to the Elevation and Improvement of Photography* 12:11 (November 1894): 520–21.

Another interview with Brady is found in George Alfred Townsend, "Still Taking Pictures, *The World* (New York) (12 April 1891): 26.¹

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8910001_BRADY_WORLD_1891-04-12.pdf

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