

History: Photographers capture Lake Tahoe

Publisher's note: *This is reprinted from the July 1988 Lake Tahoe Historical Society newsletter.*

No one has recorded the first appearance of a camera at Lake Tahoe but human beings have been attempting to capture its spectacular beauty for almost a century and a half. By the time tourists arrived at the lake to experience its beauty, the camera had already been around for several centuries. The camera obscura, a box with a hole in it that let reflected light onto a glass plate or translucent paper had been known since the 17th century. Silver compounds had been found to be photosensitive and were used to make silhouettes of leaves, flowers and other objects. It was unfortunate, and often treated as magic, that the images soon faded in the light.



In 1851, a new wet-glass process was devised. It still used light sensitive compounds suspended in liquid and, while the equipment was more cumbersome, it produced clearer, sharper pictures. This is the process used in the Civil War photographs of pioneer photographer Matthew Brady in his mobile, horse-draw darkroom.

In the 1880s, George Eastman produced film on a long paper strip and photography became popular. In 1881, R.E. Wood, who advertised himself as "the well-known photographer", set up shop a few steps north of the Grand Central Hotel in Tahoe City. He had a "great variety of views about the lake for sale", and was prepared to "do all classes of work in his line." He took pictures of patrons of the hotel, individual or groups. He was also the testy and inventive printer and editor of the Tahoe Tattler.

There are many photographs existing of the lake and its environs from the 1890s and early 1900s. All manner of visitors to the lake were taking home memories of the scenery, the boats and the people from the lake of the sky.

The 35 millimeter camera was introduced in 1925, as well as color film, though a three camera process was still needed for the latter. There are portraits, for which the subjects had to remain very still, and a few pictures of interiors at the lake. But candid and scenic photos had to await the advances in film, the invention of flashbulbs in the 1930s and slide film, or positive color transparencies in 1935.

The new technology of the camera helped to make photography an art early in its history. Beginning with portrait studies, the art expanded to reportage, then to interpretation of life and landscapes. Edward Muybridge and Thomas Eakins experimented with these forms and American's Alfred Steiglitz (sic) became the first photo-artist.

At Tahoe, C.O. Valentine set up shop in his own resort in the 1930s and took hundreds of views of the lake, the trees, the mountains and people enjoying them.

The advent of color film, Polaroid processes and TV recordings have, however, not made it any easier to capture on film the essence of the Tahoe Basin.

We know that technological progress helps, but the photographer's eye can only try to duplicate the glorious scenes that surround us. Casual visitor or longtime resident, we still attempt to keep the images alive through the lens of the camera.