



Solomon Valley History

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Peaslee Photos – A RARE AND OUTSTANDING COLLECTION

by Steven Richardson

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THE Cawker City Hesperian Historical Society announces the acquisition of a most incredible collection of historic photographic equipment and about 300 original glass negatives of local interest. Roy Frank Peaslee was born April 6, 1883, at Glen Elder, Kansas (5 miles east of Cawker City) and died February 19, 1904. In 1900 Roy bought a Vive camera and began photographing the farms and families around his home as well as at Waconda Springs and at Lincoln Park during the Chautauqua, west of Cawker City. Peaslee had fashioned a case with a drop front in

▲ **Roy Peaslee with Sisters** which he stored his camera and all necessary chemicals and supplies for developing and printing his photos. Upon his untimely death, this wooden box of photographic equipment and boxes of glass negatives were carefully placed in the attic and forgotten. About 10 years ago, the items were discovered upon the death of the last descendant of the Peaslee family. Richard Struble, professional photographer of Beloit, bought the box and negatives, not knowing the full extent of the contents captured on the glass negatives. Struble began developing prints from selected negatives but lacked the time necessary to explore the entire collection.

Fast forward to a recent Friday evening. I received a call from a friend who knew of the collection and had heard that Mr. Struble had sold the camera and negatives to parties in the Kansas City area. Horrified at the thought of losing such an important item of local historical significance, I immediately attempted to contact Struble to inquire about the status of the collection. Sunday afternoon, Struble was able to return my phone message and 40 minutes later, I got my first look at the equipment and at each and every negative.

The box of photographic equipment is perfectly intact after 100 years. There are vials of chemicals and canisters of powder in original boxes neatly stored to maximize space. The original, 1900 instruction manual for the camera, explaining the techniques for preparing the plates, developing the negatives and making prints, is tucked away in a cardboard box of glass plates. A Kodak camera candle lamp, in its original box, patiently waits its future use. There are personal items such as a lock of a loved one's hair, Roy's handkerchief, and a couple of promissory note receipts, carefully folded for safe keeping. Three small



drawers, fashioned from thin, finger-jointed boxes, hold further treasures: a scales for measuring chemicals, lenses, clips for hanging prints to dry, a razor, and a repaired screwdriver with wooden handle, to name just a few of the items. The Vibe camera is located in the lower left-hand corner of the box and sold for \$5 in 1885 when they were first produced. All these items and many more, compactly contained within a wooden crate box 13" by 21". The sloped front of the box drops forward and is supported by chains to create a writing or working surface. It is an absolute wonder that this item has survived at all and that it is complete in every way.

Then we began opening the boxes of glass negatives. Long forgotten faces and places began to come alive again. Large family groups, intimate pairs of sisters or brothers and single, newborn babies and ancient grandmothers populate the glass plates. Horses, cattle, beloved dogs and other farm animals were caught by the camera shutter's click. Brand new, two-room frame homes and crisp limestone structures pose proudly against the treeless horizon. A harvest crew takes a needed rest, long enough to be captured by the camera. Workmen are harvesting ice on the Solomon River in the dead of winter. Informal summer outings to Waconda Springs were captured by Peaslee, as well as the throngs attending a Chautauqua in the shade of the ancient oak trees at Lincoln Park. And then there are the intimate indoor pictures taken in the parlors of the various farm homes in the Solomon Valley. These indoor pictures are especially noteworthy because of their rarity, and these comprise roughly half of the entire collection.



Our plans are to begin immediately processing the negatives by scanning them with the new museum quality scanner at the Mitchell County Historical Society and producing full-page prints. It is hoped that the first public showing of the entire collection could be ready for Memorial Day weekend in May of the coming year. The exhibit would then be shown again in August, first at Glen Elder during their Fun Day and then at Cawker City during the Twine-A-Thon and Picnic. The public is invited to help identify the individuals and the farmsteads in the collection. Requests for copies of individual photos would be offered to the public for donations to help defray the costs of our museum's daily

operations and maintenance of our collections. It might even be possible to make the complete collection, with added commentary, available in book form to the public.

Work on the restoration of the 1884 Public Library building as our museum's permanent home is progressing nicely. Our hope is to have work completed by July 4, 2010, to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the dedication of the "new" building. The Peaslee Photographic Collection is a major addition to our museum, and we look forward to making them available for viewing to the general public for the first time in over 100 years.