PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES AND DEMOCRATIZES VISUAL EXPRESSION

STEVE HOFFENBERG

FOR MOST OF HUMAN EXISTENCE, methods of visually representing the world were the province of a select few individuals. From cavemen in what is now southern France to the Dutch Old Masters, the creation of visual images was typically practiced only by those who possessed an acute eye for observation, in addition to refined manual dexterity and sufficient time on their hands to put charcoal and ochre to rock, or oil paint to canvas. We'll never know how many latent visual images—be they masterpieces or daubs—lay unmanifested in centuries of would-be creators' minds for lack of physical skill or adequate spare time to record them. Compared to other forms of visual expression, the overarching way in which photography changes the world is that it dramatically simplifies and expands the creation and reproduction of images.

Mass-market film photography, initiated by George Eastman in the late 1880s, enabled visual representation of the material world for nearly anyone with the modest means to afford camera and film. Thus began the first wave of the democratization of visual expression.

As camera and film technologies improved over the ensuing decades, film photography stripped away the need for dexterity much beyond the ability to push a button; and it pared down the creator's time requirements to minutes or seconds, rather than the days, weeks, or months necessitated to produce traditional works of visual art. Soon, hundreds of millions of everyday people around the world were creating billions of visual images, peaking, for film photography, at about eighty billion consumer pictures being captured worldwide per year, in the late 1990s.

The rise of consumer digital cameras, starting in the mid-1990s, further increased the numbers of images being captured. The increase was primarily due to the nature of the storage media—erasable and reusable digital memory cards—that freed consumers from worrying about "wasting" film. Although film and film processing were reasonably priced, consumers who used film cameras always felt the need to conserve their picture-taking because every click of the shutter had an associated cost. In the digital environment, people could snap away to their heart's content, consuming little more than rechargeable battery power, then just delete the photos they didn't want to keep. And with the advent of online photo-sharing services and social networking websites, people had more things to do with their pictures than just print them.

As digital cameras kept dropping in price, their penetration rapidly spread such that today, over two-thirds of the households in the major industrialized nations own at

Karthick Ramalingam, *Looking*, 2009

least one digital camera. And by Lyra Research's estimates, the number of images captured by consumer digital cameras rose to approximately two hundred billion worldwide in 2008.

As much as digital cameras dramatically changed photography from its film era, they have had little impact on *who* creates photographic images. On a global basis, people who purchase digital cameras are largely those who already owned film cameras, or in the case of younger owners, would have owned film cameras had not digital cameras come around.

The next level in the expansion of imaging, and the second wave in the democratization of visual expression, is due to camera phones, i.e., mobile phones with built-in digital camera modules.

Mobile phones leapfrogged over wired telephone infrastructure in emerging market countries, and embedded camera technology piggybacked onto the greater mobile phone phenomenon worldwide, as people from all walks of life sought to enhance when, where, and how they communicate. Less than a decade from their becoming widely available,

the number of camera phones that have been produced now exceeds the total number of film cameras and digital cameras ever made in the entire history of photography.

In 2011, more than two billion people worldwide used camera phones, and collectively, they took over four hundred billion pictures, already exceeding the number of images captured by digital cameras that year. By the end of this decade, about three billion people worldwide will have camera phones, and they will capture about one trillion images per year, truly staggering numbers that were unimaginable in the film photography era.

With the advent of film cameras, digital cameras, and now camera phones, photography has taken visual expression out of the exclusive realm of artists, and literally put it into the hands of the masses. That changes everything.

STEVE HOFFENBERG, former director of consumer imaging research at Lyra Research Inc., is one of the world's leading analysts covering digital imaging products and markets and has authored more than three hundred market research reports and articles. Lyra Research Inc. is a market research firm and trade publisher specializing in imaging industries.

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PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES HOW WE COMMUNICATE

PHILIPPE KAHN

IN THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY, function often follows necessity when it comes to invention and innovation. By the mid-1990s, the Internet and wireless cellular technology were starting to mature, the first commercially successful digital cameras appeared, and cellular phones and computers were starting to inter-operate. As an engineer and avid user of the web and e-mail, I realized that the future for imaging in the twenty-first century would be based on bringing these various technologies together. We already had all the building blocks necessary to enable the public to point, shoot, and share photographs anywhere, anytime, and wirelessly. What we needed was for Internet servers, cellular networks, cell phones, and cameras to all work together seamlessly and intelligently.

At the time, I owned a Casio QV-10 digital camera, a Motorola Startac cellular phone, and a Toshiba laptop, and had been working for a while on integrating the technology to make my vision of a commercial camera-phone a reality. The opportunity to do that was catalyzed by the birth of my daughter, Sophie, on June 11, 1997. My wife and business partner, Sonia, was already in labor when we arrived at the maternity center. During the next eighteen hours, I had the opportunity to make myself useful in a different way than I had expected, preceding the arrival of our baby.

In previous months, I had figured out and built the basics for sharing photos via my cell phone on what then was called "the wireless Internet." Now, with our child's impending birth, we had the perfect opportunity to bring all the pieces together and share the magic of this special moment with friends and family around the world. I had brought along a bag with a laptop, a cell phone, a digital camera, and a few other bits and pieces of equipment in it. And using some supplies I picked up from a local RadioShack—a soldering iron, wire, and a few other items—I busied myself putting the final touches to the first "camera-phone"—my digital camera, hardwired to my cell phone, coupled with a wireless, Internet-based sharing infrastructure.

Philippe Kahn, First camera-phone photograph, 1997

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PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES HOW NEWS IS REPORTED

FRED RITCHIN

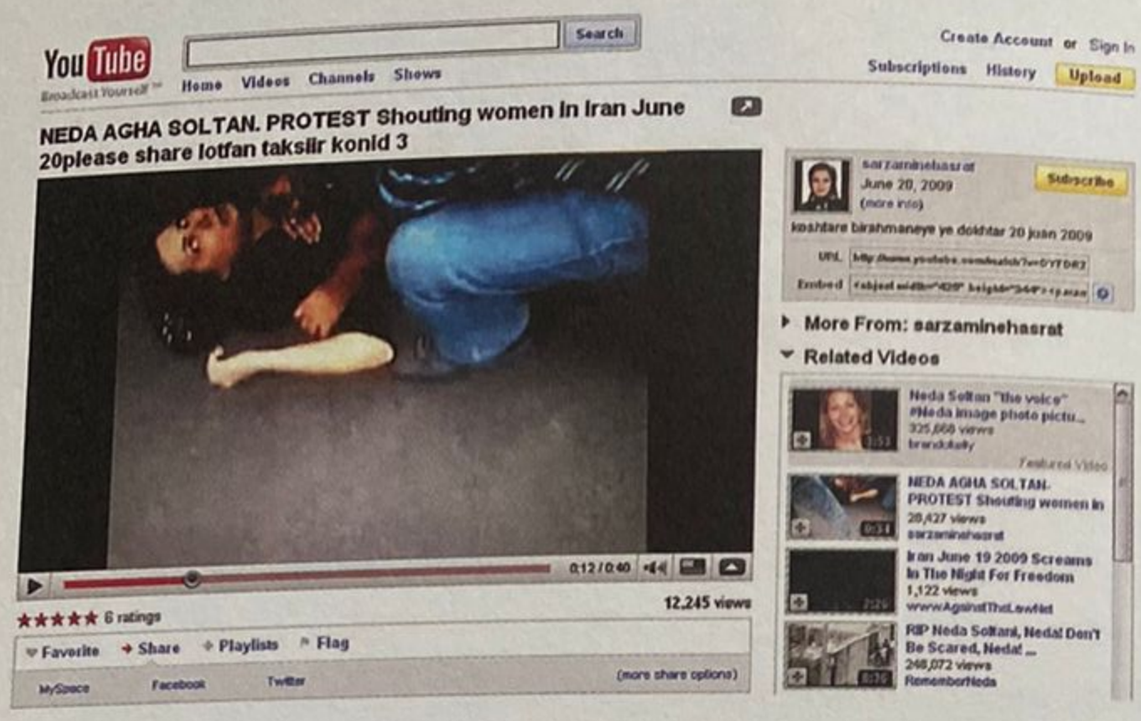
IT HAS BEEN WIDELY COMMENTED upon that much of the important photojournalism of the last several years—images of the London Underground bombing, Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse, coffins of American soldiers shipped back from Iraq, and of a young woman being flogged in Afghanistan—has been done by amateurs. More recently, amateur still and video images from Iran became critical to understanding the volatile political situation there, particularly after professional journalists were banned from the country.

Given the preference by large numbers of readers for diverse—and free—sources of news, and the financial decline of many conventional media outlets, the changing ways news images are now being made and distributed are likely to become permanent.

In some newsworthy situations—especially when governments or other powerful organizations are unable to control how events are represented—instead of expecting to see a few strong images by professional picture-makers, we will probably need to get used to seeing dozens, even hundreds, of photographs and videos made by citizens and posted directly online. All those images will demand more of readers and viewers, who will have to sort through them to figure out what the mass of unedited imagery is saying. All those images will also make it harder to wrongly accuse any single image of being faked, because so many will corroborate what any particular image might show.

Instead of being presented with iconic photographs made by experienced photojournalists, we are increasingly seeing images made by people without photographic training and who primarily attempt to capture information, not to create symbolic images. As a result, images made by digital photography's growing band of "citizen journalists" often look less studied and more awkward than those made by practiced professionals. And that, in turn, creates problems for news and photo editors whose job is to select out one or two graphically compelling images to sum up a complex news event. That kind of editorial practice, now and in the past, often simplifies and sometimes distorts reporting about what is going on. In addition, today's audiences for news are more likely to resist being told which images are the most important, especially when they've been selected by people working in the world's media capitals, far away from the action.

Imagine if in 1989, Chinese protesters at Tiananmen Square all had access to cell-phone cameras. Would the image of a lone man standing in front of a line of tanks have broken through the visual clutter to become the icon of the event? Perhaps it would have been better if that now-famous image had not become so central to the telling of the story, given the ways it represented what was going on from a Western point of view—highlighting a single individual standing up to authority instead of reflecting a larger movement of diverse protesters. Of course, it is possible that the mass of amateur images that came out of Iran is



Frame from YouTube video, 2009

part of a phenomenon that, if repeated often and elsewhere, may confuse and tire readers.

How interested and willing are we to scour thousands of images from, let us say, Kazakhstan or the Congo? The outpouring of digital "insider" imagery is and will be challenging for outsiders to interpret. Previously, primarily Western-trained or influenced reporters and photojournalists provided a bridge, making images to explain one culture to another, even if the professionals involved sometimes did not fully understand the subtleties of the culture he or she was being paid to look at. Since photography is *not* a universal language, as more images are generated by nonprofessionals, caption information may need to be written by knowledgeable readers for viewers unfamiliar with what specific images show or refer to. That may include explaining what some of the more subtle cultural referents embedded in an image—a hand gesture or a particular way of standing, for example—might mean.

All of this, of course, raises interesting questions about what professional photographers will be doing in the future. At least one answer is very clear. As viewers and readers, we will benefit from having access to strong and extended bodies of work that have explored a society in the past, and which can give us a context for understanding what is happening in the present. The news usually reports on governments and major political and economic activity, not on the everyday lives of people. Faced with contemporary images of demonstrators expressing their extraordinary anger on the streets of Iran, for example, it would have been helpful to a global audience to have access to previously produced photo-essays that explored Iranian life under calmer conditions.

The need for professional photo-essayists, both insiders and outsiders with deep understandings of specific cultures, is more crucial than ever. Their work will coexist with and contextualize the more on-the-spot work done by nonprofessional citizen journalists. What still needs to be worked out, though, is how professional photojournalists will be paid for their work, and what outlets they'll find or will have to create in order to publish it.

FRED RITCHIN, professor of photography and imaging at New York University, is the author of numerous books, including *In Our Own Image* (1990), and *After Photography* (2008), an account of digital media's impact on documentary photography and society. Director of PixelPress, which creates websites, books, and exhibitions promoting human rights, Ritchin was formerly picture editor of the *New York Times Magazine*, executive editor of *Camera Arts* magazine, and founding director of the documentary photography educational program at the International Center of Photography.

rame from YouTube video, 2009

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PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES THE NATURE AND SPREAD OF NEWS

LUC SANTE

THE POSTCARD CRAZE OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY coincided with a great proliferation of photography in the United States, brought about by simplified processes and reduced costs. Their intersection was the real-photo postcard, so called because it was printed in the darkroom, in small editions, as distinct from the mass-produced photolithograph. The real-photo card was typically a product of the isolated small town, whose newspaper could not yet print photographs and whose lonely citizens needed to communicate with distant friends.

The phenomenon began in 1905, when the postal service inaugurated a penny rate for postcards, and began to decline in the teens, although real-photo cards were produced as late as the 1930s. Around a billion cards were sent every year at the height of the craze, but it is impossible to say how many were photographs, or how many different cards were made—a card might have had an edition of one, destroyed long ago.

Virtually every town in America, however small, had a professional photographer. There were already many in the late nineteenth century, but the spread of the pocket camera expanded opportunities, and the postcard craze opened an entirely new field. The photo postcard spurred photographers to become entrepreneurs, journalists, public diarists. Real-photo cards were cheap both to make and to buy, and people collected them; even amateurs made them.

Photo postcards document nearly the whole of their time and place, from intimate matters to news events. They show the panorama of human activities: eating, sleeping, labor, worship, animal husbandry, amateur theatrics, barn-raising, spirit-rapping, dissolution, riot, disaster, death. The photographers were often tinkerers, but some of them were artists, and some of them knew that they were. Their work could be sophisticated or crude, vivid or dull, beautiful by design or by accident.

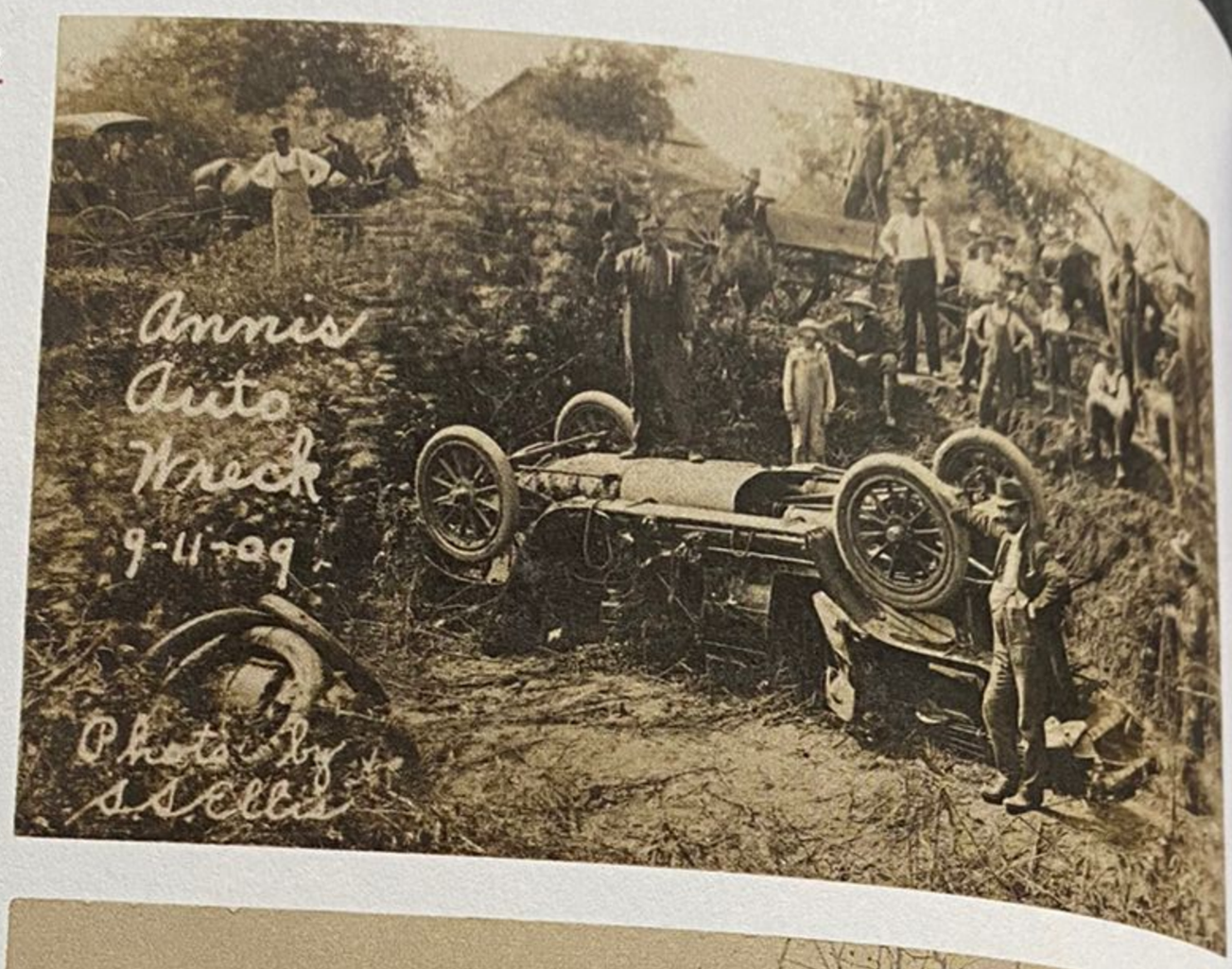
The names of only a handful of postcard photographers have survived, either because they had significant earlier careers, such as Solomon D. Butcher; or because they were massively prolific, such as Henry M. Beach (who worked in upstate New York); or because they documented an important subject, such as Walter H. Horne (the Mexican Border War, in his case); or because their other work was recognized as art even then, such as Jessie Tarbox Beals.

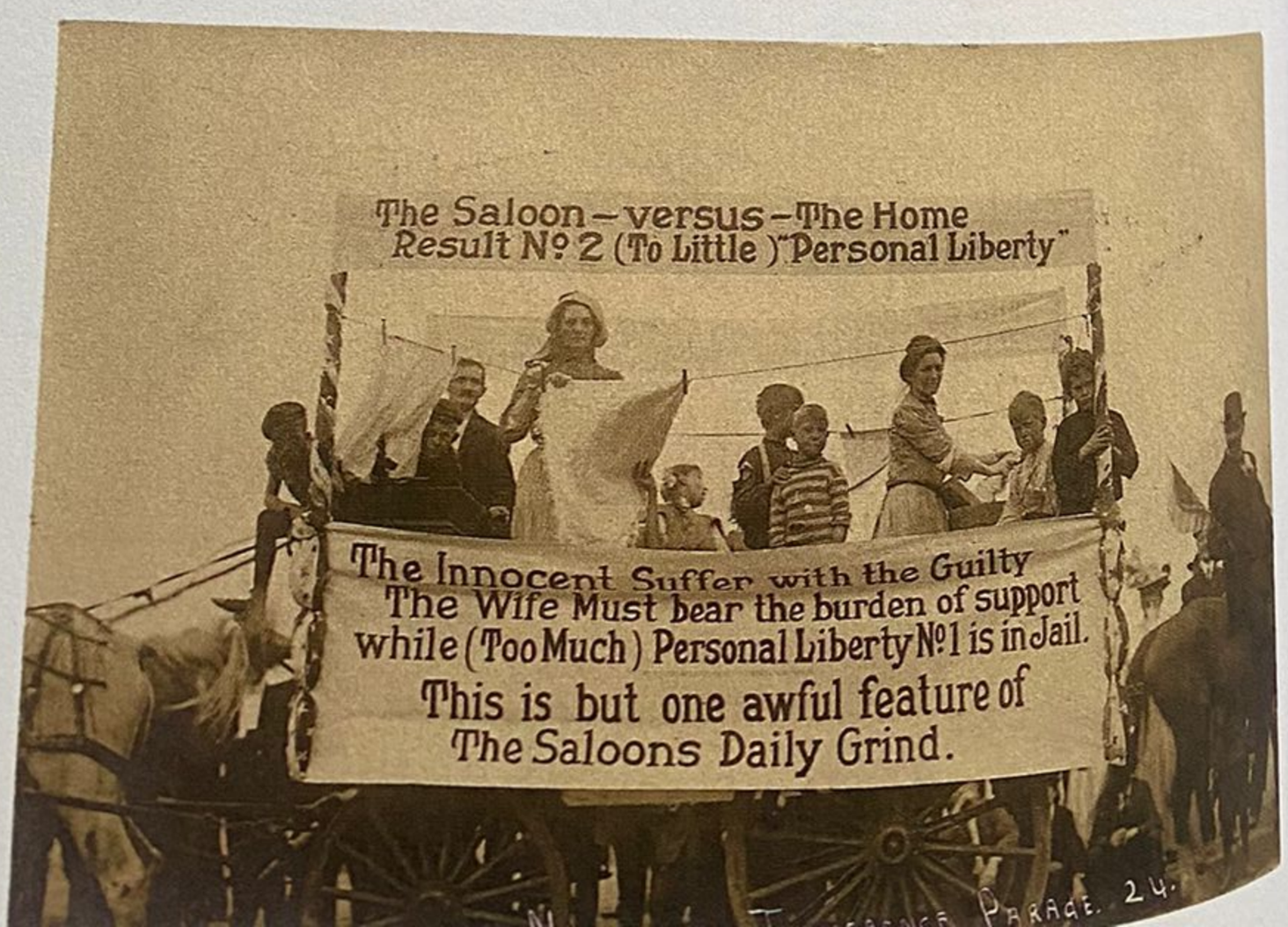
In a few cases, a photographer's archives have been preserved, but they are the exceptions. There were tens of thousands of others, many of whom did not sign their work, and, taken together, they represent a vast, teeming, borderless body of work that

TOP:
S.S. Ellis, *Annis Auto Wreck*, 1909

MIDDLE:
Arthur J. Kingsbury, *Arrived Home with the Christmas Greens*, ca. 1910–18

BOTTOM:
Photographer unknown, *Temperance Parade, Church of the Nazarene, Medora, Illinois*, 1908





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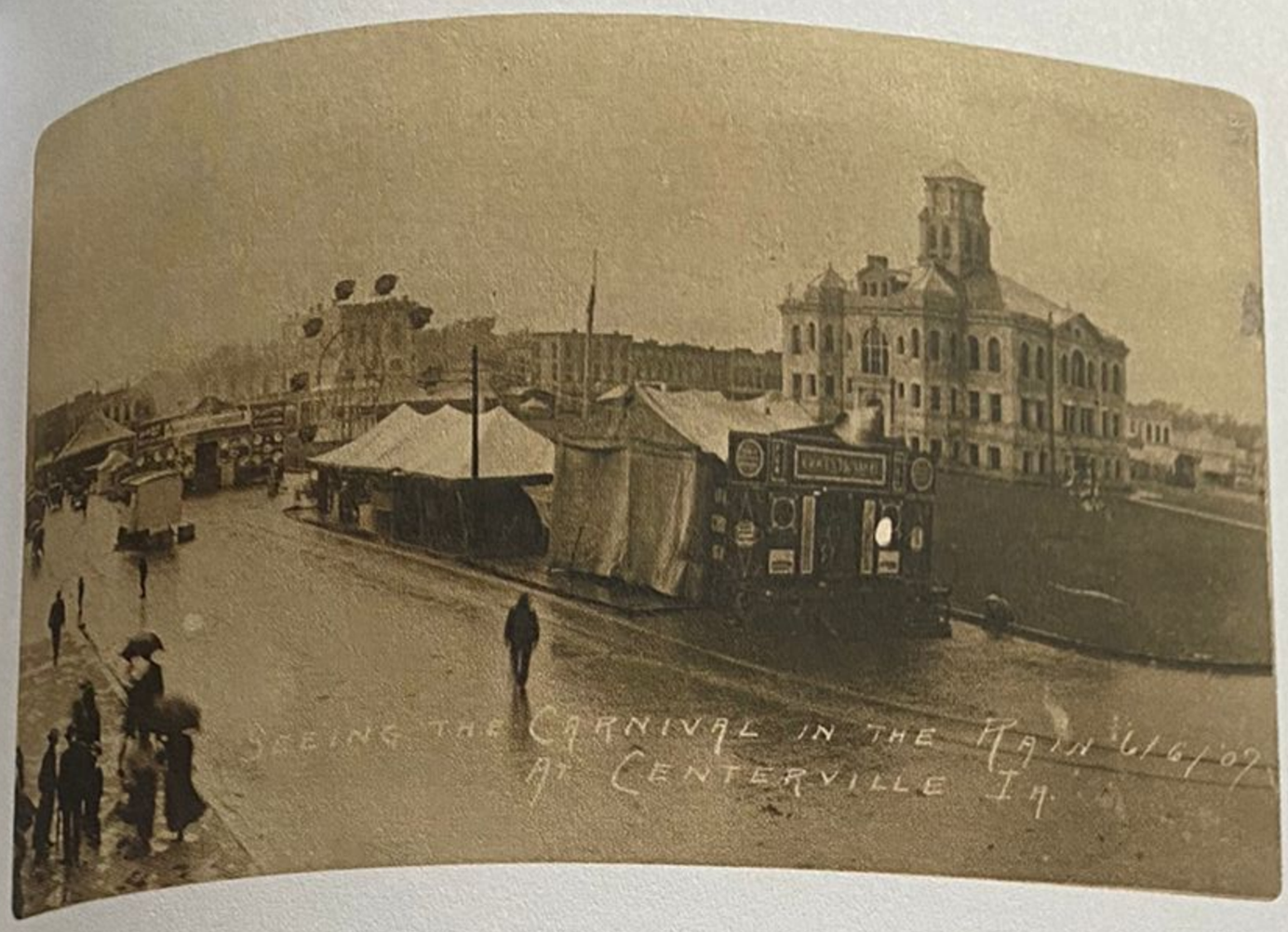

W. S. King, *Seeing the Carnival in the Rain at Centerville, Iowa, 1907*

might as well have a single, many-headed author. Self-taught and happily ignorant of history, this author was free of the second-guessing that cripples artists. He or she was out to do a job, to please a public, to turn a dollar, but also to record things faithfully, to include as many details as the frame could contain, maybe to make the familiar strange, simply by noticing things. Freedom from the historical burden made for an aesthetic that prized, above all, finding the shortest distance between two points. That is, the pictures are most often blunt and head-on, and in fact are best when they are blunt and head-on.

This approach would be aesthetically validated a generation later by photographers who had grown up with postcards, most famously Walker Evans—the real-photo-card photographers might be the generational link between the Civil War photographers and Evans and his many descendants. But postcard photographers can give the impression that they are inventing their medium from scratch. For them this might as well have been the birth of photography—everything could now be photographed, which meant that it had to be.

When we look at these pictures, what we first register is the foreignness of the time. People pose without smiling because they have not yet been taught to do so by movies and advertising. Crowds gather at parades and parties and disaster scenes and then stand there with the same solemnity in every case. Every aspect of life takes on the aspect of ritual. But then the messages on the back speak of new jobs and temporary housing. The formality of dress and architecture makes sense as a substitute for real stability.

The camera itself is responsible for some of the strangeness. The limitations of lenses can make all shallow spaces look like stage sets and all deep space appear infinite. Relatively long exposures can transform even urgent themes into frozen tableaux. Unless there is snow on the ground there does not appear to be any weather, since skies are always white, and this makes for the visual analogue of a huge, reverberating silence.

These photographs were a vital medium of communication; they were not snapshots.