A Family Decade - Almost Lost
The 1900 to 1911 Photographs of Richard Aubrey

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In September of 1982, I was called to a home in Youngstown, Ohio, to examine a small wooden crate, filled with twenty-two boxes containing gelatin dry plate glass negatives. It was proposed that I purchase the negatives, because the crate along with its contents was bound for the local landfill. The crate had come from a house whose owner had moved to a nursing facility. What remained in the home was to be disposed of by the man who had called me.

Other than the name of the woman who had lived in the home, a Mrs. Ruth Aubrey and a reference to her husband "Vincent", the seller had little information regarding the family, or the plates.

Upon examining the plate boxes and their contents, I found hand written dates and notations about the subject matter on both the boxes and on the plates themselves. The seller and I agreed on a modest price, and I took the collection home.

Over the ensuing five years I did little with the collection except print an occasional plate. During that time, however, my study regarding the history of still photography and family photographic archives at the Arms Museum and Archival Library of the Mahoning Valley Historical Society in Youngstown, enabled me to recognize the potential historic value of the information contained in the plates.

The photographer had taken great care in documenting his efforts, and I had come to respect that documentation. Working at the museum had exposed me to many family archives which carried no identification. Unidentified archives were obviously more vulnerable to disposal than identified images. Countless family histories have been lost through lack of identification and documentation. For most researchers, and particularly for those in search of specific family information, unidentified images seem inherently less interesting and valuable than identified ones. Unless there is something compelling about the process, presentation, or a unique attribute within the image itself, it seems unreasonable to request that the same level of care and consideration be given to unidentified images. Individuals are likely to discard unidentified images over time, and historical societies are likely to relegate such images to "study collections", a necessary, but not elegant, solution.

Misinformation is an additional problem when little or no documentation is provided. The "Vincent" referred to by the seller, turned out to be Venice Aubrey (1900-1980), Richard Aubrey’s first son.

Research on this Aubrey archive began in September of 1987 and is ongoing.// During the initial stages of organizing, cleaning, and printing, it was discovered that the collection was comprised of two hundred eighty-one (281) 4" x 5" and 5" x 7" glass negatives made between 1900 and 1911 in Youngstown. The work was apparently produced by an amateur photographer who had turned his lens to his family and friends, social events, and the work place. Of the 281 plates, only twenty-one lacked any identification, and only ten were broken.

The information contained with and on the plates identified individuals and events accompanied by a date, but did not clearly reveal the identity of the photographer. This lack of identification was complicated by the fact that the majority of the images reveal the history of two families whose heads-of-the-household were twin brothers. The photographer’s documentation, however, provided more than
enough information to expand beyond the plates as necessary.

Further research revealed that the photographer was a Richard Aubrey (1870-1928), son of a James Aubrey, a Welshman who along with his brother Joseph had immigrated to America in the mid-1860's.

The immigration to the Mahoning Valley started early in the 19th century. Indeed the Indian had hardly moved westward when the Welsh commenced to pour into the country to dig coal in the Brier Hill region. They were the first to dig the coal and they were the first to develop a religious life in the Mahoning Valley.\footnote{2}

Coal on the David Tod farm at Brier Hill, and other places, throughout Mahoning County brought a sizable immigration of Welsh people into the valley in the 1830's and '40's. While some came directly from Wales, others came from near Brady's Bend, Pennsylvania, where they had already been engaged in coal mining. By 1846, the year Mahoning County was organized, a substantial colony of Welsh were in the area, their numbers increasing steadily until late in the nineteenth century.\footnote{3}

Nothing in the photographic archive itself suggested a specific ethnic connection. What I did notice, however, was the presence of a musical tradition existing within a strong nuclear family.

These photographs, resulting from Richard Aubrey's interest in photography during the first decade of the 20th century, provide us with a brief but interesting look at a Welsh family home and workplace in Youngstown, Ohio, the southeastern corner of the Western Reserve. Included in that documentation are typical "parlor portraits" which give us a pictorial genealogy and clues to an understanding of ethnic characteristics, social conditions, and individual values applied to the family.

One such parlor portrait (Fig.1) dated February 1900, shows Richard Aubrey's mother and father (Mary and James) seated before the gas fire place in their home. While Mother Aubrey reads, father obviously enjoys his pipe in his favorite rocking chair. A spittoon is strategically placed nearby, and the scene is recorded without acknowledging the presence of the photographer.

The house appears well kept, and crowded, (as other interior views confirm) with ornate wallpaper, carpet, and furniture designs, all in keeping with turn of the century fashion.

The archive reveals a comfortable standard of living provided for supervisors of the "catchers" and "rollers" working the long hours in the mills.

Of specific interest in this scene is the apparent importance placed on family photographs. There are at least eighteen photographs crowded onto the mantle above the fireplace, which is itself dominated by the large portrait of the photographer and his twin brother John Aubrey.

Other views of interiors within the James Aubrey family home, as well as the homes of Richard and John, confirm the importance of art prints and family photographs as elements of personal and decorative importance.

A similar scene dated more than a year later, (May 30, 1901) and
notated "Pa and Uncle Joseph", records only minor changes in the room arrangement. "Uncle Joseph" is Joseph Aubrey (b. 1839), seen here enjoying a smoke with his brother in the comfort of James and Mary's home. Two years the elder brother, Joseph Aubrey was a long resident of Youngstown, well known during his life for his interest and support of Welsh activities.

Joseph Aubrey of Parkwood Ave., is probably the best informed man in Youngstown on local Welsh history. Coming here in the early 60's, he immediately interested himself in the eistedfods that were held, and was secretary of most of them. He wrote a 25,000 word history of the local eisteddfods, in Welsh, two years ago, planning to submit it in a contest at Utica. However, he lacked the strength and courage to begin the hugh task of copying it, and it was never submitted./4/

The tradition of the eisteddfod (ay STEHTH vahd), regional literary and musical contests conducted over several days in both Welsh and English, had long been a source of ethnic pride for the Welsh in many communities of the Western Reserve. It also helps explain the importance of music apparent throughout the Aubrey archive.

The Welsh are noted for their literary and musical contests known as eisteddfods. Youngstown’s first eisteddfod was held in 1860. The Rev. John Morgan Thomas, a musician and composer of ability, was chosen as literary and musical adjudicator. J.W. Jones, editor of "Ydrich," a Welsh publication, was the conductor....Probably the most important eisteddfod in the history of Youngstown was that held on Christmas 1865 [as] the first Gorsedd to be held in the United States was held here on the same day. The Gorsedd is a druid rite.

Eisteddfods were held nearly every Christmas from 1864 until the early 90's....infrequent thereafter....[and] revived in 1922, 1923, and 1924./5/

George Higley recounts in his Youngstown An Intimate History, "I remember the miners of the Witch-hazel Coal Company near Parmalee School going to work in the early evening through the Parmalee woods with mining lamps attached to their caps. Late at night we could hear the Welsh miners on the "Herdic," a bus of Matt Knapp's, singing on their way home to Churchill."/6/

These literary and musical traditions of the Welsh are certainly observable in the Aubrey archive. Figure 3, ("Mary Aubrey and Group") from March 3, 1901, and figure 4, ("Ma and Group) from September 3, 1901 are supported by others of Richard's photographs depicting the family in association with music and literature.

In addition to documentation available regarding Joseph Aubrey's lifelong involvement with the eisteddfod in Youngstown, Mrs. Richard Aubrey is listed as Vice President of the Woman's Welsh Club in 1922, and James, along with Joseph, is listed as a committee member for the 1925 Eisteddfod./7/

The contribution to the community by the civility of the home life depicted in the Aubrey archive was expressed by Clingan Jackson's Vindicator article of April 19, 1931, which he concluded by stating,

"As among all Celtic peoples, music and laughter is in every son
of Cambria. Perhaps of all their contributions to Youngstown life, their music and the singing is the greatest."/8/

Photographs like these and others in the Aubrey archive, help us to verify or deny our interpretations of family history. One thing that early photographs did not easily record, however, was the spontaneity of life; the "laughter" that Jackson writes about.

One must remember that the sense of restraint, or "formality" of the subjects, is more a condition imposed by the early photographic process, rather than indicative of temperament. There is a sense of laughter that comes through in the archive. The Fourth of July, Christmas, and a nine-month old, bare-bottomed Venice playing on and around the piano, are a few examples which help us see the "life" as opposed to the "photographic event."

We can contrast the majority of Richard Aubrey's images which were directed toward the social aspects of family life and the comforts found therein, with the handful of images he made of the workplace.

These images, however limited in scope, reveal the harsh environment of the coal, iron, and steel industry that dominated the Mahoning Valley from the 1830's and 1840's to its essential demise on "Black Monday" September 19, 1977.

Like his father and other second generation Welsh in the Mahoning Valley, Richard Aubrey made his livelihood from the mill industry that lined the corridors of the Western Reserve. His twin brother John (1870- 1940) also drew his living from iron and steel, and his family is equally depicted in the archive.

Figures 5 and 6 represent Richard Aubrey's documentation of his father James who worked the 12 hour day "turn", while Richard worked the 14 hour night "turn."

Figure 5 shows James Aubrey, front row, third form the left, with the crew of the 18" mill at the Valley Mill in Youngstown, dated November, 1901. The crew stands behind the red hot bar of steel which they must manipulate with the tongs they hold. James Aubrey wears a felt hat, designating him as a "boss."

Figure 6, notated "E. Jenkins and Crew, 18" Mill, November, 1901" shows James Aubrey, seated far left, with eleven other members of the crew. Notice the torch placed before the crew, perhaps as an additional light source. Early mills were poorly lit, dangerous for the men, and required visual skill to read the correct color of the hot steel for rolling under the variable light.

Both images reveal the difficult working conditions and harsh nature of the iron and steel industry that provided the economic base in the Valley and much of the Western Reserve. The violent nature of the heat and large machinery necessary together with dangerous working conditions contrast sharply with the Welsh homes which continued their literary and musical traditions.

Richard Aubrey would return home after his 14 hour day "turn" hardly able to walk. The cramps he suffered due to long exposure in the extreme heat forced him, at times, to crawl up the stairs of his home./9/.
Aubrey's views of family parlors and other interior scenes, yards, family excursions, portraits of children, friends and relatives -- the visual record of family values -- assist us in comparing his home life with that which he experienced at work.

Information to date indicates that his interest in photography lasted only ten years, but reveals a character of determination in learning a difficult photographic process, together with an enthusiastic concern for documenting his family's history.

That history, at least the photographic negative record of it, came perilously close to being discarded some seventy odd years after he had made it.

As an amateur photographer in 1900, Richard Aubrey certainly could have chosen an easier photographic technique than what was required of the dry plate process. George Eastman's Kodak Company would have happily developed and printed Aubrey's efforts had he selected any of the "Detective" cameras available since 1888.

Aubrey's images, in keeping with his amateur status and the difficulty of the process he used, are technically inconsistent. The slowness of the plate emulsions, together with low illuminations and moving subjects caused many images to be blurred and/or poorly exposed. This can be seen in Figure 5, and others of the mill photographs in the archive, where the lighting conditions were extreme. Only a few plates were found to be unprintable however, and many are elegant in the richness of the detail that the glass negative provides.

One cannot but admire the range of conditions he was willing to photograph. The archive is dominated by many posed interior scenes essentially depicting the importance and value placed on the family home and activities. Friends and relatives, children, parades, family vacations, the work place, and sadly, the death of an infant, all testify to the fact that Aubrey's documentation ranged beyond that of coincidental amateur picture taking.

He attempted more formal portraiture by hanging a background cloth, and in many images we can see the reflective glare of his magnesium flash powder.

Richard Aubrey offers us an opportunity to study this turn of the century Welsh family, and perhaps more importantly, the values inherent in a life style represented by his act of documentation.

His family album becomes ours, for a moment, as we look to his images for interpretation of ethnic values at home and at work, representative of the working men and women who built the iron and steel industry that deserves to be discovered, rather than lost.
NOTES

1. The first exhibition of prints from Richard Aubrey’s glass plate negatives was held from January 15 through April 15, 1989 at the Arms Museum in Youngstown, Ohio. Contact with living members of the Aubrey family continues.

2. Clingan Jackson, "Welsh Among First To Settle Here," The Youngstown Vindicator, 19 April 1931.


