

Windows into Wonder

BY DANIEL KOSHAREK

What makes vintage photographs so fascinating? Unidentified folks, long-gone buildings, and the clothes people wore all contribute to the allure of these images. Examining family photo albums, or as is more often the case, “the family shoebox,” brings us in contact with friends and family, captured in youthful exuberance, or perhaps at a last get together years before. Historic or vintage photographs awaken long-dormant memories, providing visual reference points and emotional links to the past. We look at those photos of ancestors and lost loved ones hoping to find a trace of ourselves, to jog a memory, or to simply illustrate our own story.

The same can be said for images of landscapes, buildings and street scenes. But I think pictures of people are the most powerful time machines. The orphaned or unidentified photographs that are such a big part of archives are particularly intriguing.

Such is the case with this photograph of an unknown couple and their dog taken by Edward A. Troutman in Cimarron, ca. 1909–13. We received the negative with a set of 400+ glass plates that were donated in 1989. Most of the images were from the Troutman Studio; the photographer also worked as a railroad foreman and a farm laborer.

The ad hoc studio setup suggests a hasty installation intended to capture domestic bliss, or perhaps commemorate a milestone event. Against a sheet tied up as backdrop, a gentleman sits with a rather startled expression while the woman looks directly at the camera with a look of weary inscrutability. The dog naps. Who are these folks, why was this photo taken? We do not know. These questions transport us back to a trait of youthful exuberance often long-dormant: our lofty imagination. ■

Daniel Kosharek is photo curator at the Photo Archives of the New Mexico History Museum/Palace of the Governors. The archives can be searched online (with the option of ordering prints) at palaceofthegovernors.org/photoarchives.html.



Photograph by Edward A. Troutman, unidentified couple, Cimarron, New Mexico, ca. 1909–13. Neg. No. 149770.