

Francis L. Cooper, Avocational Photographer

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Introduction

American photography experienced rapid and intense change between 1890 and 1910 when flexible roll film, hand-held cameras with simplified operating mechanisms, dry glass plate negatives, prepackaged chemicals, and various printing papers became readily available. Photographers no longer needed to prepare their own negatives or know how to mix developing chemicals or make their own printing paper. These technological changes brought about numerous alterations in photographic practice. Most relevant to this paper are: increased interest in avocational artistic photography, the emergence of snapshooting, and event or street photography. At the same time the public's awareness and recognition of fine-art photography increased markedly.

In some ways, these changes were a reaction against the domination of photography by professionals. As technology was simplified and standardized, people became interested in taking pictures for themselves. Some wanted family portraits and a record of life around them. They became snapshooters. Others desired an aesthetic recreation and became avocational artistic photographers. Still others combined these practices with some part-time professional work, clearly ignoring the admonitions of the purists like Alfred Steiglitz.

The Photographic Salons at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1898-1901) played a central role in the public acknowledgment of photography as a respectable art form (Panzer 1982; Homer 1984), reflecting Philadelphia's central position in nineteenth-century photography. A number of other less well-known exhibitions and competitions were generated undoubtedly as a result of the public's excitement about the "new" photography.

During this period, many photographers whose work has remained unknown to scholars produced artistic photographs that were seen by people who never attended a salon or participated in any other way in the art world of the "famous" photographers. This paper is an examination, from the perspective of cultural history, of the life and work of an avocational Pennsylvania photographer, Francis L. Cooper.¹ Cooper practiced photography in the 1890s and early 1900s in Philadelphia and rural Pennsylvania. He was a witness to and participant in one of the important revolutions in photography. His life demonstrates the ways in which shifts in photographic practice affect society. It broadens our understanding of the history of photographic practice in Pennsylvania, and ultimately the world.

1. This paper is one manifestation of a long-term and extensive study of Cooper made possible because of an extensive archive of his work compiled by the author with the assistance of many people, including his daughter Helen Cooper Fanus.

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives .



Figure 1: "Charlie and Lil (Milliken) in stand in grove. Summer, 1898."

A Biographical Sketch

Francis L. Cooper, son of a career naval officer, was born in Philadelphia in 1874. He spent his childhood in a middle-class rowhouse on the 11th Street trolley line that took his father to work at League Island naval base. Cooper's immediate family died before he was fourteen years old. He lived with his father's relatives in various parts of the city and in suburban Narberth until he moved in 1901 to Spruce Hill in Juniata County, where he spent the next forty-three years until his death.

Cooper entered the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1892. In 1896 he began visiting the Milliken farm in Pleasant View, Pennsylvania, to hunt, fish, photograph, bicycle through the countryside, and enjoy the pleasures of rural life. It was a chance to experience the "good" life—something that was impossible without leaving the "Ruhr of America," as Philadelphia was called (Burt and Davies 1982:471). Cooper's retreat to the countryside was a commonplace experience for many middle-class urbanites who wished to live out the fantasy of what Schmitt (1969) calls the "Acadian Myth." During his visits, Cooper took photographs of the Millikens (Figure 1), genre scenes of rural life (Figure 2), and landscapes of the surrounding Tuscarora Valley (Figure 3). He took bicycle/photographic trips on the backcountry roads (Figure 4). A "wheeling" excursion into the countryside to capture a landscape or a scene from a farmer's life was an important reason for many city dwellers' interest in photography.

During the next four years, Cooper divided his time between Philadelphia and the Milliken farm. In the city he took family snapshots, documented the various rooms in which he lived, and produced records of events like a fire at Eighth and Arch Streets (Figure 5). He took pictures of his medical school friends and their work at St. Agnes Hospital and made self-portraits.

Cooper's attachment to Juniata County became so strong that he eventually left city life forever to live among nature and the rural folk. In 1900 he married Gertrude Crawford, a local doctor's daughter. His decision set him apart from the majority of his social class who believed "that the ideal life is that which combines something of the social and intellectual advantages and physical comforts of the city with the inspiration and peaceful joys of the country" (Schmitt 1969:4).

By 1901, Cooper moved to a farm in Spruce Hill to become a country squire, justice of the peace, tax collector, clerk at public auctions, storekeeper, clerk at a nearby steel company, draft registrar during World War I, wallpaper hanger, and occasional professional photographer.

Four interests dominated Cooper's life: the sporting life, reading, photography, and music. The values Cooper acquired growing up in a comfortable middle-class world placed a high priority on these avocational interests, assigning them as much importance as the practical matter of earning



Figure 2: Untitled. Two men sawing lumber.

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives

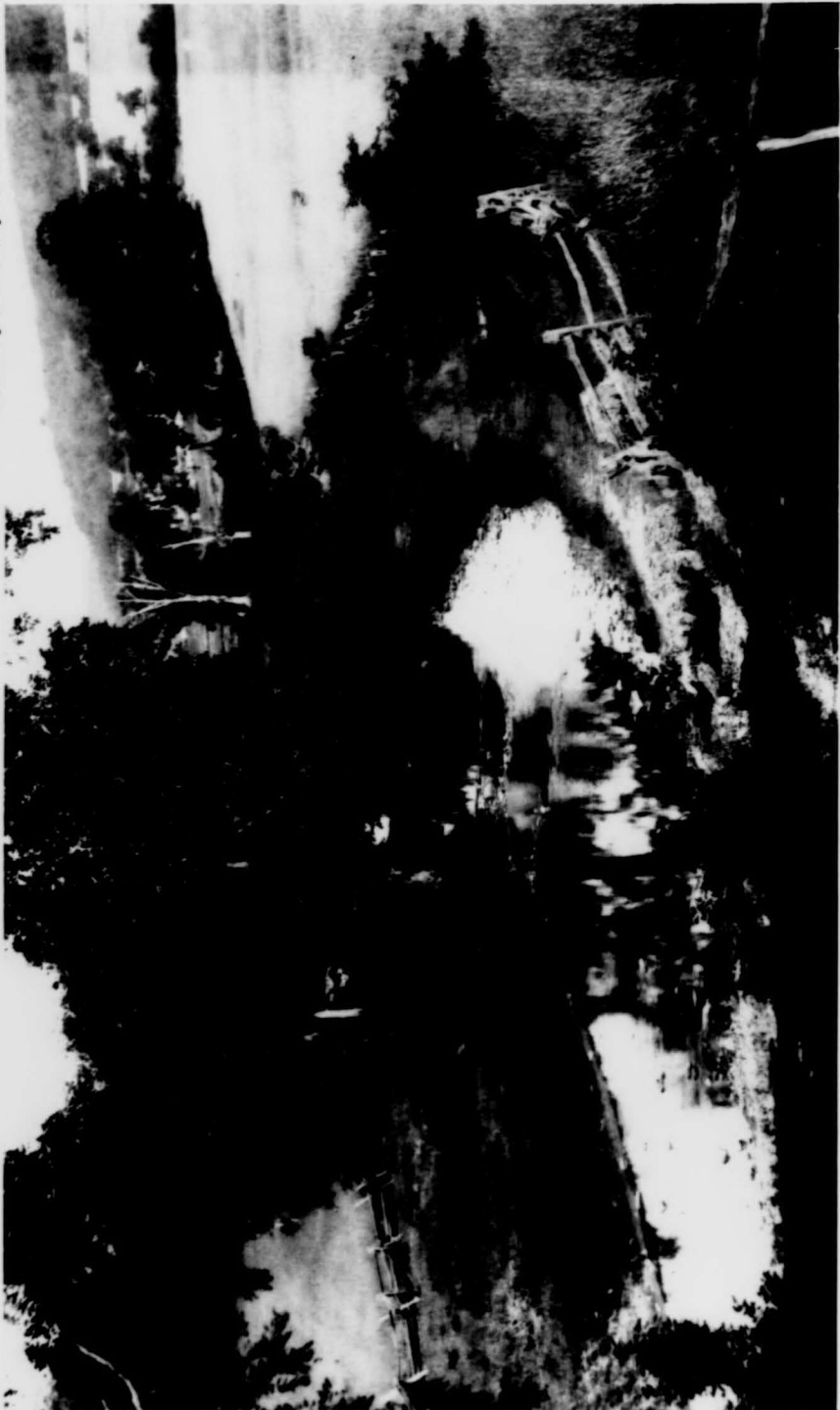


Figure 3: Near the Mouth of Milliken's Run. "Tenth Prize, 1899 Philadelphia Inquirer Contest. Also Wanamaker Exhibition Entry No. 739.

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives.



Figure 4: Untitled. Francis Cooper with gun, fishing rod and camera.

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives

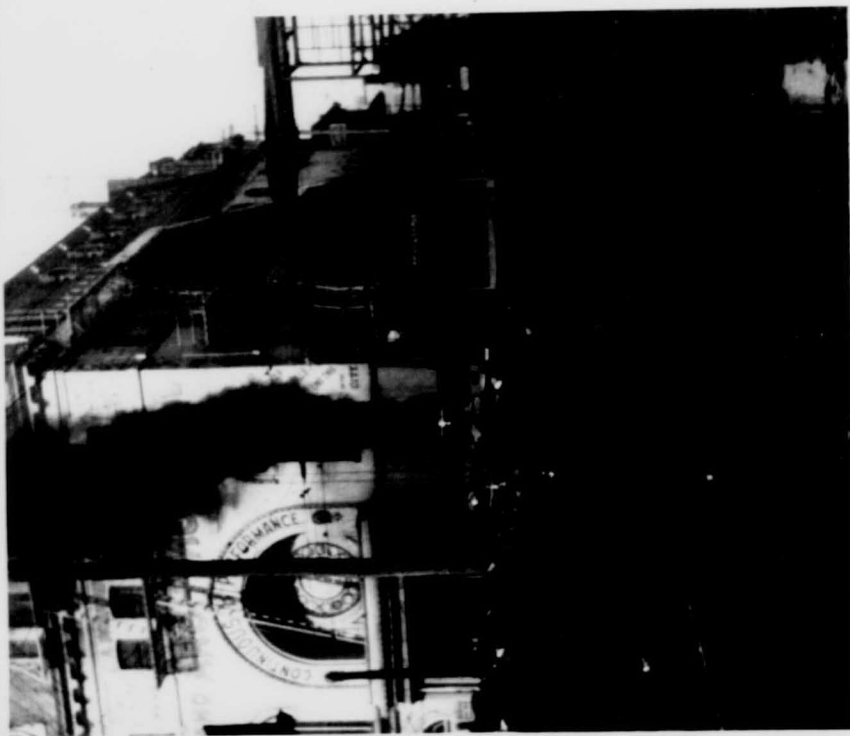


Figure 5: "Spring 1900. Fire at 8th and Arch."

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives



Figure 6: Untitled still-life.

a living. According to his obituary, he was one of the best read men in Juniata County and maintained an extensive library—the novels of Horatio Alger and Alexander Dumas and nonfiction works about Napoleon. He also had a collection of popular art—prints purchased at the Wanamaker store in Philadelphia (e.g., “Masterpieces of the French Salon of John Wanamaker’s”) and Sunday Supplement lithographs. Cooper owned *The Victrola Book of Operas* and a collection of Sousa marches and would treat his family to a concert of recorded music after the evening meal. Cooper was a competitive shooter through his adult life. In fact, guns were the longest lasting of his pastimes. He took many pictures of himself and others with guns. Most photos of Cooper show him as some sort of sportsman. His studies of birds and fish (Figure 6) are excellent examples of the way in which he combined his involvement in the sporting life with his interest in photography as artistic expression.

When and why Cooper took up photography is unclear. He could have learned the rudiments in school since it was common to teach the principles of photography in physics and chemistry courses. Unlike many amateurs, Cooper did not join local organizations such as the Columbia Photographic Society (located near where he grew up) or the venerable Photographic Society of Philadelphia, nor did he apparently have much contact with other photographers.

The lack of evidence of Cooper’s involvement with the photographic worlds of his time makes it impossible to know where he learned the photographic conventions he utilized. His photographs strongly suggest that he did have a knowledge of artistic photography. His collection of lithographs and prints clearly indicates a general interest in the visual arts.

While there is some evidence of a beginner’s technical incompetence and a preference for the informal snapshot, his early photographs display a range of interests remarkably similar to his later work, regardless of the sophistication of his equipment. It is clear that Cooper’s upbringing and education created a cultural template that provided him with a sense of appropriate subject matter and form. Landscapes, self-portraits, genre, and still lifes are all to be found among his first images.

For one year (1899-1900) Cooper entered the world of competitions and exhibitions. His photographs were displayed in three events—the 1899 John Wanamaker Exhibition of Photographs by Amateurs, the 1899 *Philadelphia Inquirer* Photographic Contest, and the 1900 Paris Exposition.

In 1899 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* started a column devoted to photography in its Sunday halftone section where salon photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, F. Holland Day, and Gertrude Kasebier appeared. The newspaper was responsible for thousands of people—perhaps more than ever before in the history of the medium—seeing fine-art photography for the first time.

The advent of halftone reproductions of photographs enabled popular magazines to publish what their editors called “artistic” photographs. The images tended toward “Girls in Greek robes, sentimental genre scenes, and portraits of beautiful women” (Panzer 1982:13). The publication of photographs like F. Holland Day’s *An Ethiopian Chief* must have come as somewhat of a shock to the *Inquirer’s* readership.

Hundreds of people entered the *Inquirer’s* 1899 contest. The paper published the names and samples of contestants’ work in its Sunday photographic column. The contest judges were Harrison Morris, director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; William H. Rau, professional photographer, officer of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, and organizer of the salons; and Otis F. Wood of the *Inquirer* staff.

The contest attracted a wide variety of talent. Edward Curtis, well-known photographer of the native American, won first prize. Francis Cooper won tenth prize for a landscape of the Tuscarora Valley (Figure 3). He received a letter of congratulations, a check for \$5.00, and his name and winning photograph in the Sunday halftone section.

While the *Inquirer* was running its photo contest and the second Pennsylvania Academy for the Fine Arts salon was in progress, twelve photographs by Cooper were selected for the 1899 John Wanamaker Exhibition of Photographs by Amateurs, including the *Inquirer* contest winner. Cooper’s photographs constitute the only evidence of the exhibition, which was neither reviewed nor mentioned by Philadelphia newspapers or photographic journals.

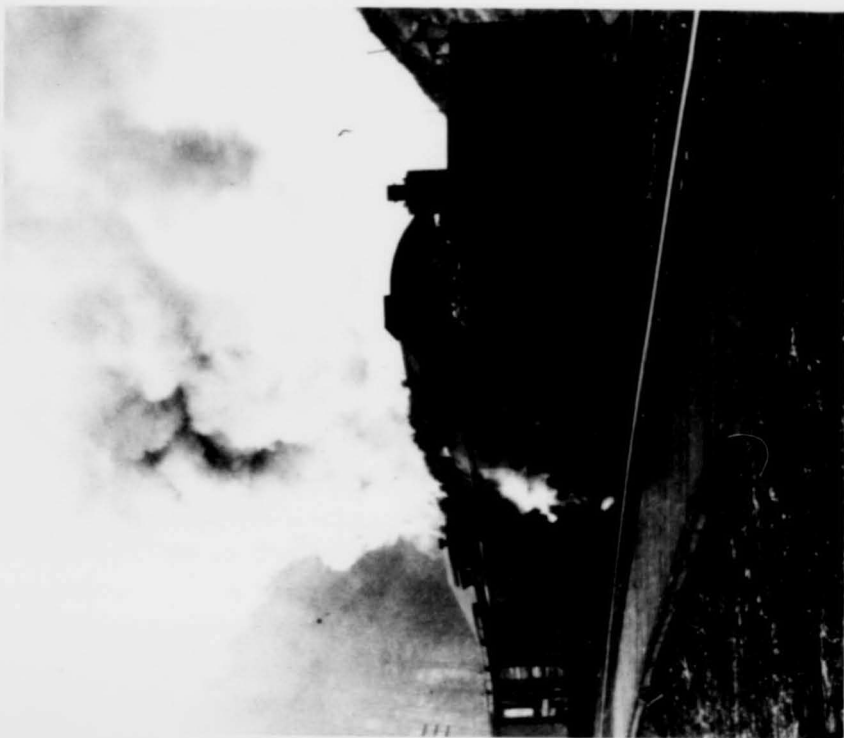
It is possible that the purpose of the exhibition was to obtain photographs for a United States exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. At least in Cooper’s case, this was the result. On November 24, 1899, Cooper received a form letter from Howard Rodgers, director of education and social economy for the United States Commission, requesting two images from the Wanamaker exhibition, “732 Pusher on Horseshoe” and “734 Blacksmith” for use in the Department of Education and Social Economy exhibition (Figures 7 and 8).

When he moved from Philadelphia, around 1901, Cooper took his mounted photographs off the wall and never displayed them again. His involvement in artistic photography ended except for an occasional use of certain aesthetic conventions in the photographs he took for other people in Juniata County. From 1901 until 1920, Cooper took family photos and portraits, school pictures, and photographs of family reunions, which were commissioned and purchased. By 1920 Cooper stopped taking photographs.

A Review of Cooper’s Artistically Intended Photographs

A description of the variety of Cooper’s photographs and a contextualization of the work within a larger historical tradition is not possible

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives



"Figure 7: Pusher on Horseshoe" Wanamaker Exhibition Entry No. 732.

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives



Figure 8: "Blacksmith" Wanamaker Exhibition Entry No. 734.

within the limits of this article. I have therefore decided to concentrate upon those images Cooper intended to be regarded as artistic as a way to demonstrate how one can reconstruct the intentions of historical photographers and in the process reconstruct cultural practices of the past.

Cooper intended some photographs to be regarded as art because: 1. They were printed on platinum paper, mounted, and signed; 2. They resemble the compositional rules employed by artistic photographers of the time; 3. They were titled by Cooper; and 4. They were entered in contests and competitions. In short, the photographs contain a set of formal characteristics regarded at the turn of the century as belonging to artistic photographs.

Before discussing specific kinds of images, the "look" of Cooper's photographs needs to be described and the images placed in a historical tradition. Cooper produced sharply focused, unretouched photographs, usually unenlarged—"straight" photographs. He used none of the techniques available to make the image look "painterly," e.g., gum bichromate printing. The underlying premise is that the observable world contained sufficient beauty and order to make it possible for the photographer to transform nature into art by observing the correct compositional rules. The task of the photographer is to strive to understand the varying qualities of light, its effect upon nature and upon the negative, and to become sensitive to forms in nature.

Cooper did not invent this point of view. It is found in the work of a number of nineteenth century photographers. The most widely-known pronouncement was made in 1886 by Peter Henry Emerson. As Panzer (1982:10) points out, "Emerson asserted that a 'straight' photographic print could express emotion, and thus deserved the status of fine art....He celebrated the artistic value of naturalistic landscapes and commonplace scenes, bringing an elaborate reading of the entire history of Western Art to his argument for the artistic value of plain, unretouched photographs."

This "naturalistic" aesthetic had been practiced in Philadelphia prior to Emerson's speech, and continued long after Emerson modified his original position. Cooper's landscapes and scenes of rural life resemble "a distinctive regional style, especially in landscape" found in the works of several Philadelphia photographers (Homer 1984 and Panzer 1982). Based upon this categorization, Cooper can be seen in a formal sense to be a "Philadelphia Naturalistic Photographer."

These photographers believed that art should be produced in nature with a view camera on a tripod. While one could easily argue, from a modern point of view, that the technology or the site of photographic work are not important elements, it should be remembered that these photographers were trying to separate themselves from the "hack" studio professional on the one hand, and on the other, from the hobbyist snapshooters with their newly invented "detective" cameras.

The need to use a particular kind of camera in order to make photographic art as well as more fundamental proscriptions about subject matter and form was challenged by a number of people in the 1890s. Steiglitz's use of a hand-held camera in 1893 is regarded by some historians as being a revolutionary act (Newhall 1964:103). "Winter-Fifth Avenue" and "The Terminal" were considered by Steiglitz, immodestly, as "the beginning of a new era. Call it a new vision, if you wish." (quoted in Welling 1978:354). Whether or not Steiglitz was the first to make art with a hand-held camera is not important. What is important is that by 1896, the time Cooper became involved with photography, a range of possibilities was available. Cooper took advantage of many of them.

Cooper's images taken from nature and the rural life are concentrated around Charles Milliken's farm and the nearby Tuscarora Creek. His interest in the photographic possibilities offered by this relatively small geographic area seems limitless. While they portray actual places—"views" with titles like "Near The Mouth of Milliken's Run," (Figure 3)—it would be a mistake to assume that they were produced solely to record the natural beauties of the locale.

Cooper's interest in the rural life of Juniata County as a place to recreate himself was derived from the "back to nature movement" which Schmitt (1969) suggests was a response to the industrialization of cities like Philadelphia. The appreciation and rendering of the landscape was an important manifestation of that attitude.

There is strong evidence that Cooper was concerned about the aesthetic problems posed by the conversion of nature into landscape more than simply taking "snapshots of local scenes." The strongest form of support for this contention is the large number of photos taken of the Tuscarora Creek. There are many pictures taken at the exact same place, but based upon the foliage, amount of water in the creek and other physical evidence, they were produced at different times of the year. In other words, Cooper produced variations of the same theme because he was interested in trying to solve certain compositional problems. He was not acting like a tourist interested in capturing local scenery. He was behaving like an artist who uses nature to create a landscape.

Three elements dominate Cooper's landscapes—the Tuscarora Creek with its ability to reflect light and shapes, forms created by the trees, and the Tuscarora Mountains. Cooper explored ways in which these elements could be combined and organized. One photograph—"Near The Mouth of Milliken's Farm" (Figure 3)—a Wanamaker entry and the *Inquirer* contest prize winner—contains all three elements. It is typical of Cooper's approach to landscape. The creek, bordered by a split rail fence, dominates the foreground with reflections of light and the shapes of the trees. Its sinuous path, broken by the

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives



Figure 9: "Tuscarora Creek" Wanamaker Exhibition Entry No. 730.

textured verticals of the trees, leads us to the mid-ground and eventually to a vanishing point. The trees bordering the creek that we can no longer see disappear into the foothills of the mountains, barely visible in the background. The sky is without cloud or other feature (an artifact of the kind of film available to Cooper rather than some conscious decision on his part to eliminate the clouds).

There are similarities between this photograph and landscapes produced by other Philadelphia "Naturalistic" photographers (Panzer 1982). Charles L. Mitchell's untitled landscape of a stream and woods (Homer 1984:18) is the clearest example. Mitchell, a member of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, was one of the chief proponents of the "Old School" of artistic photography and a severe critic of the "fuzzography" of the pictorialists. In addition, Robert Redfield's "Brook in Springtime" (1897), Frank Streeper's

"Quietude, 1897" and Henry Troth's "Morning Mists" (ca.1900) all share the same aesthetic principles as Cooper's images (Homer 1984).

Cooper's landscapes can be understood as variations of the composition displayed in Figure 3. For example, in Figure 9, the creek is wider, the trees less prominent and the mountains which form the background, less distinct. Sometimes the mountains are replaced by the forest, causing the perspective to become foreshortened. The emphasis in these images is upon the creek and its capacity to reflect light in different ways and to reflect shapes—a subject which dominates these landscapes. In other instances, the verticals created by the trees are employed by Cooper as framing devices, sometimes balanced, sometimes asymmetrical. The trees are used to emphasize fore and mid-ground. Most landscapes were made in spring or summer, usually unencumbered by animal or human life. There are some winter scenes showing similar compositional concerns—snow replaces water as a source of reflected light and barren trees offer some additional possibilities.

Cooper transformed the Juniata County countryside into an idyllic, restful place of beauty. It was his escape from the city. Once Cooper moved to Spruce Hill he stopped producing landscapes. He became a part of the world he admired as an outsider, and was no longer interested in transforming it into an aesthetic object.

In addition to imaging the countryside, Cooper produced genre scenes of Juniata County as well as Philadelphia. Scenes from everyday life of the "common folk" was a popular form among artistic photographers. Emerson regarded it as equal in importance to landscape. At the time Cooper took these pictures, genre was at the height of its popularity.

At Pleasant View, Cooper experienced a life-style very different from the one he knew growing up in Philadelphia. Cooper's photography of the rural life shows an intense interest in this world. He recorded the Millikens at work (Figure 2) and the rural life around Pleasant View (Figure 10). Some images look like the snaps city tourists might take in the country; others like "The Blacksmith" (Figure 8) were composed as a genre photograph.

Cooper also composed scenes of the sporting life and the results of his hunting and fishing trips. Some were informal records of a kill—casually taken snapshots of fish or squirrels lined up in a row. Other pictures are still-lives of fish or birds he or his friends killed. These pictures follow the conventions of this pictorial form. One has only to compare Figure 5 to F.C. Curry's 1885 photograph, "The Heron," (Newhall 1964:64) or to Jan Baptist Wennix's "The Dead Partridge," (Anon. 1984:125) to realize that Cooper was aware of the pictorial tradition and sought to emulate it.

There are a number of self-portraits of Cooper (Figure 4), but only one in which you see the camera in his hand (Figure 11). Sometimes Cooper described a negative as "Cooper by Cooper" or simply "Self." Self-portraits



Figure 10: "Sheep Snow Storm, Nov. 27.98" Wanamaker Exhibition Entry No. 733.

Courtesy of Pennsylvania State Archives.



Figure 11: "Cooper 1622" (South Broad Street, Philadelphia). Self-portrait.

have been undertaken by virtually every painter in the Western world in the last several hundred years. The problems presented to a painter by a self-portrait are parallel to those presented by the portrait. A similar argument is difficult to make on behalf of photographic self-portraiture. To succeed, the artist has to be able to transform him or herself into an aesthetic object which can then be manipulated. The technology of photography virtually prevents the photographer from having total control over all variables when attempting to photograph the self.

Moreover, there is a basic difference between the media of painting and photography which at times makes the designation of self-portrait problematic. Unless one actually sees the shutter release in the hand of the photographer, it is reasonable to assume that someone else actually released the shutter, thereby at best making the designate "self-portrait" questionable. In Cooper's case, the puzzle cannot be solved and in the long run it is not important. The only point to be made here is that in their attempts to be regarded as artists, Cooper and other amateurs assumed the behavior of the painter.

Conclusion

This paper illuminates turn-of-the-century social history of American photography by examining the work of one avocational photographer. The photographs have not been judged as aesthetic objects nor has their place in an "art" history of photography been evaluated. Francis Cooper's pictures are worth examining because they were produced when modern photographic practice was being created. Living in Philadelphia, Cooper was able to observe and to incorporate these changes into his photography.

Cooper was educated at a time when people from his social class were expected to know something about literature, music, and art—to cultivate good taste. It was assumed that they would acquire a morally redeeming avocation. Writing, scientific experiments, field trips for botanical or zoological collecting, and painting or sketching had been considered, for some time, worthwhile pursuits for the soul and mind. In the 1890s, photography joined the ranks of socially acceptable aesthetic pleasures. "The using of the camera teaches the value of light and shade, discloses deep-hidden beauties of nature, as they are disclosed to none other than the poet and the painter, teaches new truths concerning the matchless beauties and intricacies of nature, aids to make gentler lives, germinates and develops and fosters and fixes stably a sensitive love for esthetics" (Harwood 1896:250). Conditions were ripe for the flowering of avocational artistic photography. The industrialization of American cities produced a large number of affluent, educated people who sought new identities. They saw the camera as a way of exploring pictorial form.

The development of photography as an aesthetic recreation for the middle classes and casual picture-taking or "snapshooting" occurred at the same time.

Both were possible because the industry provide the public with the means to produce their own images. Prior to the 1890s, anyone wishing to make a photograph had to invest a fair amount of money in the equipment and take the time to become familiar with enough chemistry and other arcane knowledges to produce an image. The costliness and complexity of the technology discouraged most people. Photography, therefore, was left to the professional and the occasional hardy amateur.

While he was a member of the first generation of snapshooters, Cooper's upbringing caused him to see these simple box cameras as more than a device to preserve family events or displace professional portraitists. From the beginning, Cooper regarded photography as a means of artistic expression and as a fine art, and, therefore, sought to use it to produce landscapes, still-lives, and other compositions.

Artistic photography had a brief history prior to 1900. It was, therefore, only logical to reference the older and more established pictorial tradition of painting when looking for a model to emulate. Within a few years art photography changed. The Photo-Sessionists and those who followed the direction established by Steiglitz allied themselves with the avant garde and modernist movements. They searched for their form and style within photography, disassociating themselves from the painterly tradition of the pictorialists. The avocational photographer and camera club member continued to espouse a "pictorialist" aesthetic but without understanding its historical origins. Genre was produced but reduced to quaint and cute scenes of kittens and puppies in a barnyard. Landscapes became travel pictures. Eventually, avocational photographers became disassociated from a fine art tradition and became hobbyist gadgeteers whose knowledge of the medium was confined to *Popular Photography*.

Cooper did not take sides in arguments between the "old school" and the "new school" photographers about which equipment was proper, nor was he concerned with controversies which dealt with the "proper" subject for photographic art or the "correct" assumptions about composition, etc. He took pictures with box and view cameras, on and off a tripod. He was interested in the pastoralism of the naturalists who made landscapes and scenes from everyday life in the country. He also took images of city life—railroads, fire engines, workers shoveling snow on the city streets that borrowed from pictorialist ideas. He took family snapshots and professional portraits with no apparent conflict. He ignored the proscriptions various leaders attempted to place on the uses of technology, the types of subject, and the "correct" approach. He used cameras regardless of their assumed "suitability" and borrowed and mixed conventions. Cooper was not experimental or avant garde but rather lacked any real interest in being aesthetically consistent or "ideologically correct." Photography is practiced in this pragmatic manner by most people

even today, including those seriously interested in it as an art form. Photography as represented in the standard "art" histories describes only a handful of practitioners and a very select portion of their work.

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