Images of Women: Outside the Home
by Kelly I. Shaffer
and Frank Kurtik

IMAGES of Women” is a dichotomous phrase. On one level, it implies photographic replicas of females, but on a much deeper level, it pertains to our society’s view of women. Historically, most women have been photographically portrayed either artistically posed or in work situations within the home. The photo essay which follows takes women out of these traditional settings and places them in public, in candid situations — shopping, working, or resting on the front porches of their homes. The photographs have been chosen because they contain images of women in both senses of the phrase. They are photographic renditions of Pittsburgh’s women during the first half of the twentieth century, but they also provide an unconventional look at women in the period, as females participating in the life outside the home.

The reason that the essay provides such a unique look at women is the premise of the collection from which the photographs were taken. They are part — a very small part — of the Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection housed in the Archives of Industrial Society at the University of Pittsburgh. The earliest images in the Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection are dated 1905 and document the construction of Pittsburgh’s water filtration plant at Aspinwall. Because almost all of the surviving negatives from 1905 through 1907 depict work on the waterworks complex, it appears that the position of city photographer may have been created solely to document the construction of that massive project. The visual record would have complemented the traditional written record. Perhaps, once the function of a city-employed photographer was in place, the Division of Photography came to be used by city departments and bureaus other than its parent department, the Department of Public Works.1

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1 Although no written records exist, this information could be gleaned from studying the collection. After 1907, the photographs are no longer of the waterworks. Rather they are of parks, streets, and corners, depending upon

The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, Vol. 69, No. 4 (October 1986)
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The photographs now in the collection were used to mark the progress of a park's construction, record the laying of sewage and water lines, or preserve portraits of visiting dignitaries for the Mayor's Office. During the Depression, the office photographed all the WPA and CWA projects in the Pittsburgh area.\(^2\) Quite often, the only reason photos were taken was to show the appearance of particular streets.

Due to city government's financial streamlining, the Pittsburgh City Photographer Office was eliminated in 1971. The negatives, two hundred boxes in all, were transferred to the archives in Hillman Library. The photographic records of the years 1959 through 1971 were not among them, however.\(^3\)

The photographs used here date from 1905 until the late 1940s. Selectively cropped, they are a special subgroup of the total collection. The idea that they were intended to be images of streets, corners, or sidewalks, not portraits of people (let alone representations of women), lends a certain realism to them. They are not someone's idea of what is representative of women, they are the random reality of women: women who cleaned hats for a living, who liked to shop on Market Square, or whose world might have consisted only of the view from the front porch. These photographs are evocative of the public lives of women.

These photographs not only reveal the appeal of their subjects, intended or otherwise, but they are also of historical and technical value. The earliest known city photographer was Brady W. Stewart, whose name is found stamped on envelopes which held some of the first negatives. Stewart eventually set up his own photography studio which continues to operate under his name in downtown Pittsburgh. The only other city photographers whose names are known are Emil Kloes, who worked in the 1920s and 1930s; Luek James, who worked in the 1930s; and Joseph Miller, who worked from the 1950s through the 1970s.\(^4\)

All of the city photographers used view cameras in the course of

\(^2\) This is, again, not documented but can be assumed from the photographs' labels.

\(^3\) According to Frank Kurtik, these negatives were not delivered with the rest of the collection in 1971. Subsequent searches for them have not revealed their whereabouts.

\(^4\) The photographers' names and dates of employment can be found on the labels which were affixed to the envelopes containing the negatives.
their work. This type of camera is usually mounted on a tripod and has a glass plate in the back of the body. After "viewing" the subject to be photographed, the photographer inserts a negative in the back of the camera and exposes it. The most common negative sizes used by city photographers were 5 x 7 inches and 6½ x 8½ inches. Until the mid-1920s, glass-plate negatives were used. The photographers then began to use sheet film which made their work much less burdensome. The negatives produced by the view cameras are rich in quality and detail, a result of the combination of several factors. The large image area itself primarily accounts for their success, while lenses with relatively short focal lengths, emulsions with high amounts of silver, and long exposure times also contributed.

The importance of these high-quality images is enhanced by the fact that they are all meticulously labelled on the negatives. The glass-plate negatives had labels hand-stamped on the emulsion side, while film negatives were marked with labels typed on tissue paper and glued on. The labels include the following information: 1) an abbreviation for the department or bureau for which the image was made; 2) a brief description of the image; 3) the date the exposure was made; and 4) an individual image number. The special quality of the images in the Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection and the significant information for each image make this collection a very important research tool. The collection is additionally important because it depicts the city for nearly half a century.

In addition to the historical and technical value of the photographs selected for this essay, their aesthetic appeal and their presentation of a unique view of women in their era make these images especially attractive. This group of photographs allows us to see women as business people, as consumers, as females unconstricted by the boundaries of the home.
Little girls in front of Miller's Shoe House. Butler Street between 51st and 52nd.
(Photograph taken to show condition of pavement, 7/24/1909. All images in
essay taken from the City Photographer Collection, Archives of Industrial
Society, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh)
A front-porch conversation. S. 18th Street near Reuben Street. These women are apparently unaware of the photographer recording the condition of their unpaved street and board sidewalks. (5/12/1911)
Pittsburgh’s immigrant tenements are stunningly evoked in this image of a woman in front of her home. Precise location unknown. (Photograph taken for the Board of Health, 1918)
A Greenfield view; woman watching photographer record her dirt “street” with its board bridge. Exeter Street. (9/23/1919)
At the Watt Milk Station, women pose with their children which they have brought for health exams and milk supplies. (Photograph taken for Child Welfare, 7/26/1922)
Woman and her children (unaware of photographer, all are moving) outside their rough home. Lawson Street, northwest from the summit of Webster Avenue. (8/18/1924)
Shopping in Diamond Square. The Center Square Market. (Photograph taken to show condition of sidewalk, 5/19/1928)
Watching the photographer examine the poor construction methods in her neighborhood. Schenley Avenue. (6/29/1928)
At the Il Duce Quick Lunch. 317 Market Street. (7/12/36)
Child in the Hill District. 88 Washington Street. (7/12/36)
Waiting for the bus at the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company. Butler Street east of McCandless Street. (7/19/1937)
A NEW EASTER HAT

Mama was a devoutly religious person who embraced the message of the Free Methodist Church with her whole heart and soul. Works... were all important to salvation. Personal adornments such as bracelets, necklaces, and rings were forbidden, along with any other adornment of silver or gold. ... We were never allowed any trimming other than ribbons on our hats. Hats were a very important part of our wardrobe. When we went to church, to town, to visit, anywhere outside of our immediate neighborhood, [we wore hats.]

Buying a new hat at Eastertime was a rite we observed in preparation for the season. After previewing the new styles displayed in the windows and on the shelves of the millinery shop... , we would begin the serious business of selecting and trying on the hats we thought would be most becoming. The milliner would bring out the chapeaux not on display from deep drawers under counters lining the walls. They were wrapped in tissue paper, and I think I shall never see anything more impeccably clean, nor handled more carefully, as the saleslady would gently find the most becoming angle to set them on our heads... Although we knew beforehand that we would not be allowed to wear a hat trimmed with flowers or feathers, we would settle on one bedecked with one or the other in the hope that Mama would weaken and allow us to take it as it was, but before we left the shop Mama would have the milliner strip it of everything but the ribbons. Thus our hopes of being transformed from plain Janes to Renoir portraits would be dashed.

(From Eves Brynn’s memoir, “In the Nurture and Admonition of the Lord — and Others,” a recollection of youth in a Pittsburgh Free Methodist home in the early twentieth century. On file at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.)