One Man's Picture of a Community:
The Photography of
Frank France

By Bonnie L. Sanford
Frank France captures two local gentlemen hamming it up for the camera.

All images from the photograph collection at Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Museum of Rural Life
Perry Liggett, July 9, 1917, in his WWI soldier's uniform.

The Frank France Photograph Collection at Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Museum of Rural Life includes over 400 glass-plate negatives of people and places around West Middletown, Washington County, Pennsylvania. Twenty-five of these photographs are now on exhibit at Meadowcroft with plans to rotate in new images from the collection each year.

Frank France was born November 30, 1877, in the small rural community of West Middletown, the youngest son of John Davis and Clarinda Wherry France, proprietors there of The France Hotel.
Under the company name "Last Chance Photography," France focused his work on southwestern Pennsylvania, particularly on the community of West Middletown. The collection documents the occupations and industries that kept the community thriving: mine and railroad workers, farmers, and tradespeople.

France recalled his work as a traveling photographer in a collection of oral histories by Jane M. Fulcher archived at the McKeever Study in West Middletown: "In regard to the duration of my picture business, my first delivery of pictures was in the town of Greenville, Pennsylvania, during December 1903. I followed this work up until 1914 in various towns throughout the country."
In 1902, the young photographer married Belva Lockwood Poole; reflections of the love shared by this couple emerge through the lens of his camera. In one image that reveals a trick of the trade, Belva and Frank sit stunningly dressed inside a horse-drawn carriage as Frank slyly holds a string attached to his camera's shutter.

Some photographs feature infants dressed in silk and lace christening gowns amidst decorated backdrops. The reality of death is also evident as mourning family members pose next to the coffins of loved ones. Other images highlight the architecture and landscape of a community that remains nearly unchanged a century.
later. There are images of family, friends, and local events. Those who personally knew France fondly remembered his humorous nature, and many of the photographs show locals and family members dressed in whimsical outfits sporting silly, exaggerated facial expressions. These unique images add a sense of warmth and local flavor to this treasured collection.

Frank France's images will be exhibited at Meadowcroft through fall 2006.

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