

Windows on an Ever-disappearing World

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The photographs in this book are all drawn from the Yale Collection of Western Americana at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. It may surprise some that the collection contains tens of thousands of photographs, including many from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Photography is an art and craft we usually associate with museums, something to be seen framed on gallery walls rather than on tables in the reading rooms of research libraries. But the history of photography in the United States and the history of the North American West have been so intertwined that no collection which seeks to document the history and culture of Native American communities as well as the global migrations that have transformed the North-American West since 1492 can ignore the medium.

Photography came to America in the 1840s, the same decade in which the annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, the Oregon Treaty, and the California Gold Rush transformed the West. As the federal government and citizens of the United States asserted new authority over large parts of the continent, pioneer photographers accompanied Zachary Taylor's army to Mexico, gold seekers to California, and government survey teams to the Rocky Mountains. They set up studios not only in the booming metropolis of San Francisco but also in the small rural towns of Iowa. They sold their pictures to local residents to hold in their homes but also sent them to the nation's capital to inform discussions in Congress and the Cabinet. Exhibited in studios and galleries in Eastern and European cities, distributed in books, and mounted on cards, photographs shaped the ways that American and European popular culture perceived the people and places of the Trans-Mississippi West.

At the same time as photography was influencing public policy and culture, the ways in which the West was being transformed shaped early American photography. Investors in railroads, mines, and western lands joined government scientists as patrons of extended projects in large-format landscape photography that would help confirm their verbal descriptions of western resources. A widespread desire of Americans to imagine a trip on the transcontinental railroad, a visit to Yellowstone National Park, or a tour of wealthy homes overlooking the Golden Gate contributed to the emergence of serial photography, including the publication of boxed sets of stereoviews that provided remote audiences a three-dimensional experience of western wonders. The opportunities and demands created by western expansion contributed to photography's development as a medium of record as well as a form of creative expression.

Although the United States changed dramatically between 1840 and 1940, American photography continued to find the West a place of interest. The Works Progress Administration replaced the Geological Survey as a key federal sponsor of photography; the WPA's collaboration with more than a dozen photographers created an enduring record of the rural West during the Great Depression. Private patrons of photography such as the Union Pacific Railroad or Leland Stanford faded away, but *LIFE*, *Fortune*, and other illustrated magazines, as well as non-profit organizations like the Sierra Club, underwrote the creation of a large body of work that depicted the costs and benefits of industrial, urban, and residential development in the West. Independent stereoscopic photography succumbed to international syndicates and the Disney-themed View-Master, but inexpensive photobooks emerged as a means by which photographers could distribute their images to a wide public audience.

In the last half-century, the period with which this volume is concerned, new patterns have emerged for supporting and distributing photography of the West. Federal executive agencies no longer sponsor major photography projects, but the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have become channels of government support. Buffeted by political controversies, both the NEA and NEH have distributed money and decision-making to state and local arts boards who have stimulated the development of geographically focused projects, many of which have explored western communities or issues. The transformation in the government's role from immediately employing photographers to indirectly sponsoring them has been mirrored in the private realm. A precipitous decline in popular illustrated magazines has been offset by the emergence of foundations as powerful patrons of photography. While the diverse missions of contemporary American foundations support a wide range of photographic projects exploring Western topics, the foundations' interests have shaped the themes, subjects, and expressive modes of those projects every bit as much as corporate

sponsors did after the Civil War. At the same time, museums and research libraries have begun to emerge as important patrons of Western photography. Before 1970, few American museums or libraries had embraced the mission of developing and curating photography collections. Over the last fifty years, one after another of the country's major cultural institutions have established photography departments. The curators of those newly established collections have spent much time acquiring historical collections, and it is clear that they have also become a significant component of the contemporary photography market. The decisions they make about which photographs to add to their holdings not only validate existing work but influence what new photographs will be made.

The history of photography in the Yale Collection of Western Americana resembles the national pattern. The collection was created in the 1940s in response to the donation of William Robertson Coe's extraordinary personal library of rare books, manuscripts, and art that documented American expansion west of the Mississippi River. Mr. Coe held important photo albums of Yellowstone by William Henry Jackson and Frank Jay Haynes as well as an extensive collection of A.J. Russell's photographs of the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad. The gift spurred the Yale University Library to review its holdings and transfer materials like Mr. Coe's to the newly created special collection. The transfers included dozens of Alexander Gardner's portraits of Native American diplomats that Yale professor Othniel C. Marsh had donated to the library in the nineteenth century. Other faculty members and Yale graduates such as James Dwight Dana, Frank Bradley, Arthur Brewer, Alphonso Taft, and Gifford Pinchot had donated photographs by Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, and Edward Curtis. Shortly before the Western Americana Collection opened for research in 1952, Yale alumnus Walter McClintock, who had spent over a decade at the turn of the century photographing the Blackfeet Indians of Montana, donated his photographic archive.

In the three decades after it opened, the collection made several important acquisitions of nineteenth-century Western photographs including a set of daguerreotypes of scenes from the Mexican War and a portfolio of Carleton Watkins's mammoth plate photographs of Yosemite. The pace of acquisitions quickened in the 1980s, significantly expanding the collection's holdings not only of government sponsored survey photography, but also of Western studio photographs, images made by hundreds of pioneer photographers who opened businesses across the West. The acquisition of two private collections, the Peter Palmquist Collection and the Victor and Lori Shephard Germack Collection, established the Yale Collection of Western Americana as one of the country's leading repositories of nineteenth-century Western photographs.

The collection did not begin to collect photography of the contemporary West until 1995 when it acquired 1,000 exhibition prints and more than 3,000 work prints

documenting the career of Yale alumnus David Plowden. The Beinecke Library's agreement with Plowden also included plans for his negatives and contact sheets to come to the library when he was finished using them. The acquisition of David Plowden's photographic archive established a model for the Western Americana Collection's efforts to acquire contemporary work. Whereas many museums and galleries strive to build a collection of masterworks that represents the breadth of work being done in the West, the Western Americana Collection has focused on documenting in depth the work of a limited number of photographers. Typically, the library has acquired several hundred prints from each photographer it has collected; it has also made commitments to preserve the photographic archive of several individuals. This book seeks to expose seventeen major acquisitions that the collection has made since the mid-1990s.

The emergence of arts organizations and cultural-heritage institutions like the Beinecke Library as significant patrons of contemporary photography, as well as the increased role that artists and critics have come to play on the award panels of leading foundations, has made judgments about contemporary photography more reflexive, engaged with the history of the medium as well as the immediate qualities of a particular image or photographic project. Well into the twentieth century photography enjoyed the benefits and suffered the costs of its shallow history. The lack of a canon against which to compare and evaluate new work liberated photographers but also left them without traditions to work with or against. By the 1930s, as photography approached its centennial, artists and critics such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen began to define its history and its canonical images, but that process moved forward slowly until the 1970s when multiple institutions began to emulate the program that Steichen and John Szarkowski established at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Since then, an outpouring of exhibitions and monographs, as well as the proliferation of academic photography programs, have transformed the way that scholars, curators, and photographers think about the medium and about new work.

The anxiety of influence weighs heavily upon photographers of the contemporary West. All artists, literary or visual, confront the challenge of finding original insight or expression amid the work of their predecessors. Photographers working in the West today must navigate between the masterworks of photographers including Carleton Watkins, Timothy O'Sullivan, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston and the popular, if often inaccurate, iconography of the West created by Hollywood, television, and the advertising industry. To create distinctive work for an audience saturated with images of "the West," past and present, they must simultaneously grapple with popular nostalgia for an imagined past and the extraordinary corpus of outstanding work compiled by those who came before them. To create a portfolio of images that makes us look anew at the West, to see what is distinctive about it today, requires a mix of courage and patience, of imagination and persistence.

Among the issues confronting contemporary photographers (and curators) is the question of whether “West” remains a useful frame of reference. In an increasingly global economy marked by the dominance of mass-media, chain stores, and social networking, do the communities and landscapes of the North American West present distinctive stories or embody particular issues that enhance our understanding of American history and culture? The seventeen photographers whose images appear in this book have responded in various ways to this question and to the challenge of making original work about the West.

Jon Lewis, Roberta Price, and Owen Luck used their cameras to document social movements that arose from and transformed Western economic, cultural, and political structures. All three participated in the movements they recorded: Lewis, the creation of the United Farm Workers; Price, the blossoming of a rural counterculture in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado; Luck, the rise of the American Indian Movement and, more recently, as an observer, the cultural renaissance that has flourished among indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest.

Other photographers have created visual records of their immediate communities and homelands. The photographs of Richard Buswell, from Helena, Montana, and David Grant Noble, from Santa Fe, New Mexico, explore and reanimate the deep history of the regions in which they live. The abandoned sites and discarded objects they depict seem both unfathomable and oddly familiar, distant but approachable. Miguel Gandert, from Albuquerque, portrays the enduring vitality of traditional Indo-Hispano culture in contemporary New Mexico. Abe Aronow, from San Francisco, and Kim Stringfellow, from Southern California, contemplate contemporary ways of living in the West. Aronow’s candid portraits wryly comment on the eccentricities of San Francisco’s residents, while gently celebrating its rich diversity. Stringfellow’s images examine the many ways Americans have tried, and often failed, to live amid the austere beauty of the Mojave Desert.

Sometimes it is a visitor who most clearly perceives the defining characteristics of a community. Although they were raised in the Northeast, David Plowden and David Ottenstein have focused their cameras on the inexorable transformation of the West’s agricultural heartland, trying at once to convey what was, what is, and what is to come among the small towns and family farms of America’s prairies and plains. The challenge of sustaining community in the contemporary West also interests John Willis who has spent nearly a quarter-century visiting among and learning from the Lakota people. Willis’s images, which spiral outward from intimate family portraits, to community gatherings, to the reservation landscape and the non-Indian communities that surround it, present the vitality of the Lakota people as well the challenges they confront.

Will Wilson and Toba Tucker have deliberately engaged historic photographic projects to draw attention to what is ephemeral and what endures in the West and

in its people. They provoke us to consider the legacy of earlier projects, the way older images can distort our thinking about the contemporary West, and how the people and places of the West have changed for better and for worse. Wilson's portraits of Native Americans challenge the cultural hegemony of Edward Curtis's work. Tucker once moved to Heber Springs, Arkansas, for two years to record how the townspeople had changed since Mike Disfarmer portrayed them in the early 1940s. More recently, she has undertaken to reframe scenes that William Henry Jackson and his colleagues embedded in American popular culture.

Traveling through the West, Lauren Henkin and Marion Belanger find it ripe with visual metaphors that illuminate the cavalier disregard we often exhibit toward nature's power and our careless treatment of its abundance. In contrast to the monumental landscapes of Watkins, Jackson, and Ansel Adams, their images suggest the fragility of our presence on the land. The intersection of human and natural histories is also a major interest of Laura McPhee and Karen Halverson. Their expansive color images explore the many ways contemporary Americans inhabit and transform landscapes shaped over millennia by wind, rain, fire, and tectonic upheaval.

Despite their distinctive projects and diverse tools, the photographers represented here all work within a documentary tradition that has been a major aspect of Western photography since the nineteenth century. They make photographs to share with others what they have seen, or perhaps more directly, what the world looks like to them. Their work is rooted in specificity, anchored in the concrete. They present to us opportunities to see a particular person, place, or event outside our usual field of vision, to see something we have overlooked, or, perhaps, to see differently a scene we have looked at without comprehension. They do not copy the world; they create an intervention that stands between us and the world, an intervention that encourages us to see, feel, and think differently about the world than we did before we looked at the image they have created.

It is ironic, in a book of selected images, to acknowledge that the works of its contributors, even at their most powerful, are best understood as parts of their larger projects. Like poems in a volume or songs in an album, their photographs are meant to be encountered in sequence, their meanings enhanced or qualified by images seen before or after. As in any sequence, an individual photograph may come to stand for the whole, to epitomize a project or the artistic accomplishments of its maker, but outstanding documentary photography consists less in making a single powerful image than in the creation of a body of work that compels an audience to connect individual images and see how pieces come together to present a larger, more complex, more nuanced "view" than any one picture can.

The photographers of this book recognize the power of association; among them they have published more than seventy-five photobooks in which they present

their images in sequences they designed to shape how readers experience them. For this book, however, they have collaborated with the editor to select the photographs and provide brief essays about each picture. Except for Jon Lewis, who passed in 2009, each photographer selected one of their own photographs, about which they wrote. The editor chose a second picture, about which he has written. The responsibility for arranging the images fell to the editor. His arrangement is meant to encourage readers to consider how the work of different artists speaks to others, to suggest that our understanding of the individual images, and of the artists who made them, is enhanced if we see them not only as part of a single artist's body of work but also as part of a national project of looking at the American West, of considering how it remains a distinctive place, inhabited by people whose personal stories are embedded in its rich history.

This volume does not seek to propose a grand narrative about the contemporary West or American photography so much as it strives to encourage contemplation and inquiry. The images shown here were selected from Beinecke Library's collection of more than 7,500 photographs made by the seventeen photographers. The library has built that extensive collection to support research by artists, students, and scholars seeking to examine not just a masterwork, but the project from which it emerged as well as the creative process behind it.

The earliest photographs reproduced here are from 1966; the most recent were made in 2016. Spread across fifty years, the pictures reflect the changing nature of photographic capture and printmaking. The equipment used to make the photographs ranges from compact 35mm cameras using rolled black-and-white film through bulky view cameras (the largest of which holds a single 8 x 10 sheet of color film) to various digital SLRs whose sensors can capture images in monochrome or in more than 16 million colors. The original photographs include tintypes, silver-gelatin prints, chromogenic color prints, and a variety of pigmented-ink prints made from digital files, some of which were created by scanning film negatives and others that were created directly by digital cameras. All the original photographs are available to be examined in the Beinecke Library's reading room.

For several of the seventeen photographers, the library has collected negatives, contact sheets, and work prints as well as exhibition prints. They reveal the evolution of a photographer's eye and technique—in the field, in the darkroom, in a digital editing program. Sometimes they preserve the “too hot” and “too cold” images that bracketed the “just right” exhibition print. Sometimes, those negatives and contact sheets preserve an imperfect photograph that an artist declined to print but that nonetheless conveys unique information about what the West looked like a particular time and place. The library holds them in the conviction that photography provides an essential, if imperfect window on an ever-disappearing world.

If you like what you see here, please come to the Beinecke Library to explore the original collections.