

The Art of Early Photography in Union County

by Alicia Pucci

Tightly wrapped dark curls are pulled back in a cascade down the back of her richly decorated dress. She is adorned by large jeweled earrings and a brooch which hangs at the base of her high white fringed collar. Her self-possessed expression is focused beyond the right side of the camera, which records her ephemeral moment.

Far from the years of portraits like this taken by Lewisburg photographer William M. Ginter, today's era is marked by digital cameras, photo manipulation and the faddish selfie. The average American takes about 322 photographs per year. That means that every two minutes we snap as many photos as the whole of humanity took in the 1800's.

The first photograph ever was taken 188 years ago by French scientist Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. Luckily, the subject was a building because reproducing the image was a tedious process that took several hours. By the late 1850's, most American photographers had switched from metal-plated photo formats to large glass-plate negatives and albumen silver prints. This method produced a photographic print on paper from a negative and allowed for a shorter exposure time of fifteen minutes or less. One could then photograph living subjects in the flash of a shutter.

In a Lewisburg Business Directory, an advertisement by J. Wes. Cornelius promotes, "Facts Speak Louder than Noisy Assertions, words please the ear; so do the fine Artistic Photographs Please Everybody who has their Picture taken." In the 1880's, photography had expanded from a science into an art practice accessible to the millions, sparking the opening of many photo studios and camera shops in Union County. The most common photograph type was a cabinet card, a *cartes de visite* adopted as a style of portraiture that consisted of a thin photograph mounted on a card measuring only a few inches. It usually included logos and information to advertise the photographer's services. Notable practicing photographers promoted fine pictures and a variety of styles, producing hundreds of cabinet photo portraits throughout the turn of the 19th century. From business men to young children, as sitters they were each transported into an idealized setting by the studios use of lighting, backdrops, props, attire and poses.

One Lewisburg professional who was unrivaled for his excellence and artistic effect was William M. Ginter. He was especially known for producing detailed portraits of those who were associated with Bucknell University. His studio was on the corner of 3rd and Market Street. Equally talented Lewisburg craftsman included Pross and P.C. Hunter at 326 Market St., J. Wes. Cornelius at 316 Market St., and James S. Brown at 6th and Market Streets. Popular Mifflinburg photographers included John Slear located on Main St. over Farmers' Bank and the James Haus Studio.

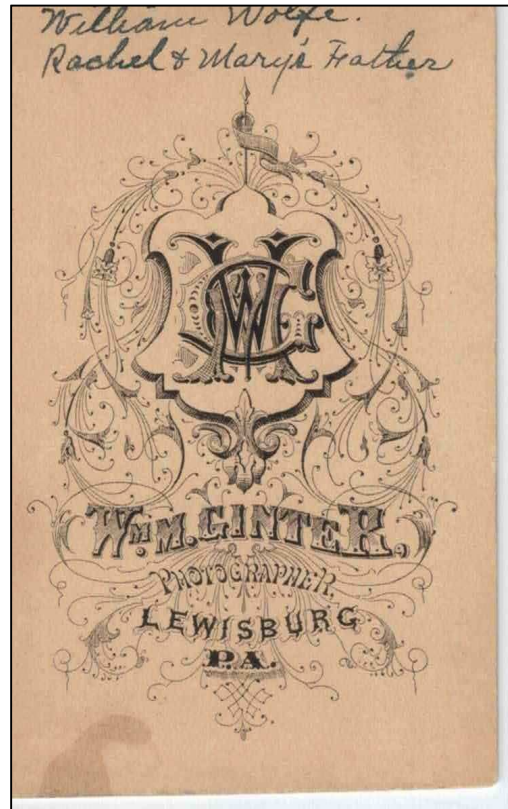
Eternal images of expressionless faces are captured in each cabinet photo. Every person is calmly composed and dressed in what appears to be their best clothing. Yet amongst them all, not one is smiling. A few theories attempt to answer this age-old query. One belief is that in order for the photographer to take a clear image of an individual, the sitter had to remain very still; having to remain motionless most likely discouraged smiling. A second conjecture is based upon the fact that having photographs taken was a rare and expensive luxury. The specialized photographers of Union County typically photographed middle class citizens and working professionals. Perhaps it was an artistic preference of the photographers, who deemed that a decorous smile is evanescent while a passive

visage reveals one's true character. These were not the serious expressions of candid snapshots, but rather well-executed sittings as if having one's portrait painted.

Union County cabinet photos are an art unto themselves. Creative flourishes can be found within the print of each individual photographer. The production of the image is as distinctive as the patron being photographed. To view original photographs taken by the aforementioned photographers, visit the Union County Historical Society. Discover if any of the portraits are part of your ancestral lineage.



Ginter cabinet photograph (front)



Ginter cabinet photograph card (back)

Cont.



Pross cabinet photograph (school girls)