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YOU CAN'T BELIEVE YOUR EYES: INACCURACIES IN PHOTOGRAPHS OF NORTHERN AMERICAN INDIANS

JOANNA COHAN SCHERER

Pictures, especially photographs, have been either ignored or overlooked by most anthropologists. Reproduced for the purpose of breaking up text or as fillers for lack of text, they are often found without captions, source, or any documentation, or cropped beyond recognition. Further, there has been little attempt at source criticism as there has been in art history. Anthropological pictures can be important documentary sources but before they can be used must be critically analyzed and evaluated.

Drawings, paintings, engravings, and even photographs are no more objective than written material. The artist or photographer has a point of view, a personal or cultural bias, and although the camera may pick up more than the photographer originally intended, still the photographer aimed his camera at but one point of one event in a continuum of action (Pitt 1972:50). Thus, though a picture is an actual record of an event and not an after-the-fact record, such as a painting made from memory by an artist who witnessed the scene, or field notes written up during or after the event, its objectivity is limited by the data accompanying it.

Some of the data on which later researchers might evaluate the authenticity of visual material are as follows: who took the picture, when, where, why (purpose for which it was taken), how (type of equipment used), who is in the picture and their reaction to being photographed. Unfortunately, too many photographs remain undocumented and thus almost useless as source material for the scholar using pictures as ethnographic data. This does not mean that all undocumented picture material is totally useless. Undocumented pictures, especially photographs, have been frequently used as source material for certain purposes. Travel magazines or popularized works often show photographs with no information, which nevertheless give one the "feel" for something. This may be as specific as what type of architecture one will see in a particular city, or as unspecific as views that give one a "feeling" for life. Thus the often-used phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words," depicts the use of photographs for that purpose. The family picture album with its scanty if any documentation has always been used by itself both for entertainment and for reinforcing kinship ties. In addition, photographs of buildings or sites without detailed documentation may be used as source material for reconstruction purposes. These then are some of the uses of undocumented picture material.

Some of the factors that are vital to a study of anthropological photographs, especially historical ones, are a knowledge of the limitations of early photographic equipment, a comprehension of the photographer's biases and goals, and a knowledge of the inclinations of the subject being photographed.

Today's pocket-size or instant developing cameras make it difficult to understand the conditions under which early photographers made their pictures. Figure 1, taken on the Hayden Expedition in 1870, shows one of the cameras used by William Henry Jackson, a well-known photographer of North American Indians. In addition to the burro loaded with this gigantic camera, Jackson needed a wagonload of chemicals, a dark tent, and hundreds of glass negatives while in the field. Negatives made of thick glass were used until 1884 when George Eastman introduced the first paper-roll film. The glass plates were frequently eight by ten inches or eleven by fourteen inches in size and about a quarter of an inch thick; they weighed almost a pound apiece. In the photographic process the glass was covered with an iodized collodion and then bathed in a silver nitrate solution. The picture was then exposed for several minutes to fix the image and developed immediately (Gernsheim 1969:194-199). The plate could be used only when it was wet, and thus this type of photography became known as the wet-plate process (Taft 1942:119). After the plate was dry it was varnished and packed in a wooden grooved box to await making prints at a later time. An individual being photographed was frequently backed into a metal vise to keep him, particularly his head, still during the exposure. Figure 14 shows the bottom half of the stand for a head vise painted out by some later individual at least several generations after it was shot. It was taken in 1868 by A. Zeno Shindler who probably was so used to the head vise that he didn't even see it. It was reproduced unretouched in the Handbook of North American Indians (Vol. 30 of the Bureau of American Ethnology publication, Volume 2, p. 66) in 1910 "exemplifying" the Nez Perce. Even with these precautions many views are blurred. Photographic equipment was thus cumbersome, fragile, and most difficult to master. This limitation of equipment should be taken into consideration when one views posed, "stoic" portraits of Indians. Not until later did more portable, faster-speed equipment allow for the spontaneity of everyday behavior to be captured.

The goals and biases of particular photographers are very important. There were many people taking photographs as early as 1860 despite the difficulties of using the equipment. Two types of photographers, quite different in their goals,
although not always mutually exclusive, were the anthropological photographer and the commercial photographer. The anthropological photographer was primarily interested in documenting how the Indian currently lived, probably because he believed Indians were a vanishing race. Included in this group were official government cameramen who took photographs of treaty councils and delegates visiting Washington, D.C., and museum anthropologists doing fieldwork. The commercial photographer, on the other hand, some with permanent studios in the frontier towns, some with traveling galleries, took pictures primarily to make money. These men often attempted to make their subjects look exotic, savage, or romantic to create more interest in their product—the Indian prints they sold. One should not underestimate the popularity of this type of product. In an age without movies, television, or the automobile, the family library and parlor were the seat of family entertainment. Here photographs, especially the stereograph, were a vital part of family fun. Indian stereos were especially appealing and thus profitable to the photographer.

The inclinations of the subject also need to be considered. Even if the subjects were camera shy, because they lacked understanding about the photographic process or through fear that their soul was being tampered with, their personal preference influenced the picture obtained. Other preferences are unusual costumes which appear in a picture and are the result of the individual’s peculiarities and not the custom of a group (Figure 2). The use of an item such as a feather duster used by Sky Striking the Earth, a Chippewa photographed at the Smithsonian in 1896, was probably the man’s
own idea and used as a substitute for a traditional headdress. Another frequent personal preference which is seen in interpreting a picture is the primping that often took place before a picture was taken. Thus dressing up in ceremonial costume to perform mundane activities or being surrounded by unrelated artifacts is commonly seen.

All kinds of tricks can be used to get the desired photographic results, including requesting the printer to print the photograph in a special way to block out certain activity or to alter something. For example, John P. Harrington, a prominent ethnologist and linguist requested in the 1930s, that his negatives of California Indians be printed extra light because his Indian friends did not want to see themselves with dark skin (Harrington n.d.).

The limitations of photographic equipment, cameramen's biases, and subjects' inclinations thus all contribute to discrepancies in the ethnographic picture record and must be considered in a study of historical Indian photographs. Following are some example of specific inaccuracies.

John K. Hillers was the chief photographer of John Wesley Powell's second Colorado River Expedition of 1871-73. He began the trip as a boatman but replaced the two professional photographers when they left the expedition. Hillers learned the art of photography rapidly and his pictures on this trip are always remarkable, if not always ethnographically accurate. He later became the chief photographer for the U.S. Geological Survey. Because Major Powell was head of both the Survey and Bureau of Ethnology, Hillers' Indian pictures became a sizable part of early Bureau records. He was actively taking Indian photographs until he retired in 1900. Hillers' later pictures of Indian delegates to Washington, D.C., and of Indians taken on field trips after 1873 are completely different from this early series. As a whole they do not show the same ethnographic inaccuracies as can be seen from the photos of his first trip among the Great Basin Indians.

The Paiute and Ute Indians in these photographs, from the Colorado River Expedition, are posed to the extreme and rather humorous in some of their content. Figure 3 shows Major Powell and a Ute woman posed on a skin examining a mirror case. The Major, in his Indian-styled buckskin costume topped with feather cuts an amusing figure while the woman wears a Plains-style buckskin garment. The Plains costuming is typical of this entire Great Basin series of photographs. Walter Clement Powell, who was Major Powell's first cousin and an earlier contender for the role of photographer on the expedition, wrote in his journal dated October 4, 1872, "After breakfast Maj., Jacob, Jack [Hillers] and I drove over to the Paiute camp to picture it; were at [it] nearly all day. Braves, squaws and pampooses were done up in the most artistic fashion, as also was the Ancient Arrow Maker" (Kelly 1948:457). Figure 4 shows the old Paiute arrowmaker and his daughter dressed up in their new Plains-style garments. Frederick Dellenbaugh, the artist, noted that "he is chipping a flint arrowhead the flint being fastened with pine gum in a sort of handle. Generally the flaking was done with a piece of bone and the palm of the hand was protected by a bit of buckskin" (Euler 1966, Appendix I:4).

Julian Steward in his article on Hillers' Great Basin photographs notes that art seems often to have outweighed
realism in the selection of objects represented. “A woman in semidress probably indicates Powell’s and Hillers’ idea of photographic art rather than actual use of garments” (Steward 1939:4). Figure 5 shows a Paiute woman named Kaiar posed supposedly in native summer dress. In fact, however, southern Paiute traditional dress was scanty, due both to the climate and to the poverty of the people. Even Powell observed this in his official report, saying that they wore very little clothing, not needing much in this “lovely climate” (Powell 1875:126). It is therefore doubtful that in summer women wore such dresses.

Thus, in addition to posing the Indians, it has been further established that the costumes were not actual garments owned by them. According to Dellenbaugh, “All the buckskin garments in these photographs were made to order for Major Powell on old patterns, and after the photographs were made the garments were sent to the Smithsonian Institution” (Euler 1966, Appendix I:2). In reality, the Indian women probably wore clothing like that of the white women in the area. Figure 6 shows Kaiar in her more usual cloth settlement-type clothes.

Otis T. Mason confirms the above: “Much of the clothing (buckskin and rabbit fur) and many of the baskets were made by the Indians working under the directions or rather observation of Mrs. E. P. Thompson, the endeavor being to have the work done by the methods employed before the coming of the whites and by the older people of the clan” (Mason 1902:490-491). Mrs. Thompson was Powell’s sister, and her husband was the chief topographer of the expedition and the field supervisor. Although the rationale for having specimens made for the museum was logical, one wonders how much direction was given by Mrs. Thompson.

It is generally agreed (Fowler and Fowler 1971; Euler 1966; Kelly 1972) that the Plains-style buckskin costuming that dignifies many of the Indians in these photographs must represent Powell’s and/or Hillers’ idea of what garments these Indians should wear and should not be viewed as traditional Paiute costumes. Figure 7, again of southern Paiutes, this time outfitted in upright feathers, is likewise completely without authenticity. Among Owens Valley Paiute in California upright feather headdresses were used as part of the dance costume (Steward 1939:14), but nowhere has this been found in northern Arizona, except in these Hillers photographs.

Much of the material collected by Major Powell on this expedition is housed in the U.S. National Museum with very little accompanying information, sometimes not even the tribe. However, it is known that much of the costuming photographed in 1871 to 1873 was made for Powell; and in one case there is indisputable proof that the dress worn by the subject was lent to her by Powell for the occasion of being photographed.

Figure 8 is of a Paiute mother and children from northern Arizona taken by Hillers in 1873. Notice that she is wearing a beaded buckskin dress. According to Powell’s letter of transmittal with the specimen, dated April 12, 1871, the dress was collected from the Utes probably on his first Colorado River Expedition in 1869. It was cataloged as Ute, accession #2106, catalog #10800. It was then carried back by Powell into the area of the southern Paiute for this photograph two years later. The museum accession number
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and Colorado R. written across her bodice is undeniable evidence, which underscores the unreliability of this whole series of photographs.

What can be seen here then is a premeditated distortion of the historical record by a man whose work is so well thought of that it is tempting to accept it at face value. Major Powell left a stunning record of accomplishments, and his energy created one of the foremost organizations dedicated to recording American Indian traditions, the Bureau of American Ethnology. The reason he allowed these pictures to be entered into the record seems to be simply one of monetary gain. He, as others, sought a share of the lucrative market photographs created. According to Darrah, Powell received 40% of the proceeds of the sale of the Hillers stereographs, Thompson received 30%, and Hillers received 30%. There is no record of how much Powell made on this entire enterprise, but during the first six months of 1874 Darrah reports that the sale of Hillers photographs totaled $4100. A joke around the U.S. Geological Survey in the late 1880s was that Major Powell had paid off the mortgage on his house through the sale of these views (Darrah 1951:182).

Like Hillers, DeLancey Gill was a photographer for the Bureau of American Ethnology. Gill was employed by the Bureau from 1888 to 1932. During that time, he accompanied expeditions to the field and photographed Indian delegates who came to Washington, D.C. These delegates were often brought to the Smithsonian by Andrew John, a Seneca who was paid $1.00 a head for each Indian he brought to be photographed (Anonymous 1903-06). The photographic record made by Gill during this time shows the
tendency even of Smithsonian photographers, who were more concerned with the historical record than commercial photographers, to try to capture the more exotic side of the Indian. The following six pictures were all made by Gill at the Smithsonian.

Figures 9 and 10 show two Cheyenne men, Jacob Tall Bull and Thadeas Redwater, wearing the same shirt with beaded flag design and headdress. They were taken in 1914. Figures 11 and 12 of Playful Chief and Comes Upon the Village, Osage elders, are wearing almost entirely the same costume from moccasin to hat, including a James Buchanan peace medal issued in 1857. Minor variations are in the neck scarfs, cane, blanket and top feather. These two were taken in 1900. The costumes shown in the last four figures were not found in the Smithsonian ethnological collections, so it is not possible to determine if the photographer had a hand in their costuming or if the group simply pooled their clothes and allowed one another to use each other's garments when the time came for their picture to be taken. Regardless of which reason is correct, the ethnological record has been confused by this duplication and exchange of costume. In some cases, knowing whether a man had exchanged his costume with another would be vital, if one is trying to identify the role or feats of the person by his dress.

Studio props, including full Indian costumes, especially Plains dress, were owned by numerous commercial photographers. Alexander Gardner, who started his photographic work in America with Mathew Brady in 1856, is thought to have had such a collection of Indian costumes in his studio in Washington, D.C. According to J. Cobb, who did research on Alexander Gardner from material in the National Archives, Mrs. Gardner,

had the unhappy task of assisting her husband in the posing of the Indians and outfitting them in feathers and beads and tribal garments from a smelly collection of native costumes maintained by the Gallery. For they often came to Washington dressed in odds and ends of the white man's clothing rather than their traditional dress. They would bring their squaws and papooses to the Gallery with them and while the Gardners were engaged with sitting, the Indian children would appropriate any articles or items of furniture that they could get away with. Despite the fact that the sittings were something of an ordeal for the Gardner family, many of the Indian delegations were photographed at the Gallery until about 1880 [Cobb 1958:134].

Despite Cobb's research, of the 186 photographs in the Smithsonian attributed to Gardner, only two show any similarity in clothing, and this is simply the same tobacco pouch being held by two Blackfoot Sioux. However, photo-

Figure 11

Figure 12
graphs in the Smithsonian attributed to A. Zeno Shindler, which there is reason to believe may be by Gardner (Walsh 1974), do indeed show Indians wearing the same costume. Figures 13 and 14 are of this series and are images of two Nez Perce Indians named Jason and Timothy. They were taken in 1868 and both are wearing the same warshirt and leggings and holding the same pipe.

Other photographs show more conclusively the use of clothes from the museum collections. The Indian man photographed in Figure 15 is surrounded by artifacts bearing museum catalog numbers. Catalog cards can be seen dangling from his left wrist, on the drum, gourd rattle, and elsewhere. The photographer and date are not recorded, but it was in the Smithsonian about 1900. He is identified as a Winnebago scribe, but any resemblance to reality is probably coincidental.

Studio props, especially Plains dress, were owned by many commercial outfits. There is picture evidence to hypothesize that Christian Barthelmess, who photographed Plains Indians and Southwestern tribes in the 1880s and 1890s (Frink 1965), must have had studio clothes in which he dressed his subjects. Figures 16 and 17 show two different Cheyenne men photographed by Barthelmess, both wearing the same distinct shirt and also holding the same pipe.

Major Moorhouse, a commercial photographer active among the Plateau Indians around 1900, carried his gallery with him (Moorhouse 1905). He posed his subjects with great care, using the same studio props again and again. The two Moorhouse pictures, Figures 18 and 19, show Rosa Paul and Anna Chapman wearing the same hat and dress. Rosa Paul, who is nursing the infant, is a Wallawalla; Anna Chapman is a Cayuse.

Besides dressing up their subjects, many photographers attempted to create exotic airs through the use of body paint. If the Indian posing did not wear paint, some commercial photographers doctored up the negatives so that it looked as though the subject did engage in this so-called exotic habit. Figure 20 of a Kansa girl is an extreme example of this doctoring. Lines applied to the negative run over her eyes and mouth. The photographer in this case is not known, but it was doctored up sometime in the late nineteenth century. A less disturbing example is Figure 21 of Mohave and Maricopa men showing face paint added to the standing Mohave. At least in this example it is possible that the man posing had some facial decoration present which did not show and therefore was only touched up by the photographer, E. A. Bonine of Pasadena, California, after he took the shot in 1876.

William Soule, another commercial photographer who took many photographs of Plains leaders in 1860 and 1870
(Russell and Weinstein 1969) took many that are invaluable to the historical record. However, he also liked to include Wichita “cheesecake,” and Figure 22, is an example of those that were no doubt more lucrative than historically significant. Figure 23 by Soule, showing a boy named Lone Bear dressed in Kiowa costume and then later (Figure 24) in Osage costume with face paint added after the picture was completed, has confused the record to the extent that the boy’s tribe is not identifiable.

Some of the works of William Soule, Christian Barthelmes, DeLancey Gill, and Jack Hillers have been cited here to show kinds of visual problems faced when researching anthropological picture records. Even the most documentary-minded photographers had their moments when historical accuracy became secondary to other goals. The value of these North American Indian photographs then is primarily that they reveal how American photographers, even anthropologists, distorted the view of Indians for commercial, aesthetic or other purposes. These distorted photographs obviously cannot in themselves be used indiscriminately by anthropologists in a study of the ethnology of American Indian tribes. They can, however, be used by anthropologists to determine such things as the influence of White culture on a tribe. Thus, though distorted, the pictures still have value.

However, William Soule, Christian Barthelmes, DeLancey Gill, and Jack Hillers did not always distort the historical record. On the contrary, most of the photographs they took (and which I have not illustrated) are accurate historical records and thus very valuable for anthropologists. The pictures are of special value, sometimes because they are the
Figure 24

only record of their day, accompanied by little if any written record.

The ultimate goal of picture research must therefore be to carefully examine and to detail the circumstances of each image as far as possible in order to understand the historical and anthropological circumstances behind each. By doing this, inaccuracies and distortions of record, some of which have been mentioned here, can be better understood and the visual image can be placed both in an historical as well as an ethnographic perspective. The value of revealing these inaccuracies is to caution the researcher about the complexity of picture research and to make them aware that the visual record cannot be taken at face value but must be studied and analyzed, perhaps even more than a written source.

NOTES

1Source criticism of pictures means an exhaustive study of the historical circumstances from which a work, such as a photograph or painting, emerged. The when, where, why, how, and who questions must be established for each picture and considered in as wide a historical framework as possible.

2A traveling gallery was a portable studio. These galleries varied immensely from horse-drawn wagons, to flat boats, to hand carts pushed by the photographer. Some included the full reception room, sitting gallery with props and elaborate backgrounds, and chemical dark room, while others were merely conveyances that carried all the material needed for the photographer to set up his outdoor studio and darkroom. The darkroom could be made as simply as covering one's head and equipment with a large calico bag, which was fastened around the photographer's waist (Gernsheim 1969:276).

3Traditional Chippewa men's headdresses varied but frequently included upright feathers. Feathers, eagle or wild turkey, were worn to show that a man had met an enemy. One feather was used for each scalp taken. Thus feather headdresses were evidence of great personal bravery (Lyford 1942:112).

4Anthropologists specializing in North American Indians use these photographs in studying change in Indian life, especially change in material culture (clothing, house types, implements, etc.). Social, religious (especially ceremonial), economic, and political changes can also, to a limited extent, be interpreted from pictures. Who is sitting with whom and where they are arranged in a formal photograph especially during delegation visits, can be used by researchers in the study of politics and status. What dance (especially ceremonial) was being performed at a given time and whether the photographer was allowed to take photographs of it in its entirety can be interpreted. Types of food being prepared and eaten can show economic conditions, as pictures of house types show change of habitation and availability of material over time.

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Figure 1 — Some of the photographic equipment of William Henry Jackson. Photographed on Hayden Expedition, 1870. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 33818-a.

Figure 2 — Sky Striking the Earth, Chippewa, from White Earth, Minnesota, wearing a feather duster headdress. Photograph by William Dinwiddie, 1896. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 590-a.

Figure 3 — Major John Wesley Powell and Ute woman identified as Yan-mo or Tau-ruv, wife of Won-wan. Photograph by John K. Hillers, Uintah Valley, eastern slope of Wasatch Mts., Utah, 1872-74. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 1540.

Figure 4 — “The Arrow-maker and his daughters.” Photograph and caption by John K. Hillers, Kaibab Plateau, northern Arizona, 1872-73. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 1609.

Figure 5 — Kaiar, a Paiute, posed in Hillers' cheesecake stance with breast “artfully” displayed. Photograph by John K. Hillers, Vegas or Meadows, southern Nevada, 1872-73. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 1653.

Figure 6 — Kaiar in settlement type dress. Photograph by John K. Hillers, Vegas or Meadows, southern Nevada, 1872-73. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 1654.


Figure 9 — Jacob Tall Bull, Cheyenne, from Lame Deer, Montana. Photograph by DeLancey Gill, Smithsonian, 1914. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 220-a.

Figure 10 — Thadeas Redwater (also called Mayom), Cheyenne, from Lame Deer, Montana. Photograph by DeLancey Gill, Smithsonian, 1914. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 226-a.

Figure 11 — Playful Chief (also called Saucy Chief), Osage, from Oklahoma. Photograph by DeLancey Gill, Smithsonian, 1900. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 4060-b.

Figure 12 — Comes upon the Village, Osage, from Oklahoma. Photograph by DeLancey Gill, Smithsonian, 1900. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 4101-d.

Figure 13 — Timothy or Tamason, Nez Perce chief who signed the treaty of 1868. Photograph probably by Alexander Gardner, Washington, D.C., 1868. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 2923-a.


Figure 15 — “Winnebago scribe writing on birchbark.” Photographer and date not recorded. Caption from Smithsonian file print. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 8392.

Figure 16 — Studio portrait of Dives Backward, a northern Cheyenne. Photograph by Christian Barthelmess, Fort Keogh, Montana, 1888-97. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 56066.

Figure 17 — Studio portrait of northern Cheyenne man. Photograph by Christian Barthelmess, Fort Keogh, Montana, 1888-97. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 56067.

Figure 18 — Rosa Paul, a Wallawalla. Photograph by Major Lee Moorhouse, about 1900. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 2902-b-13.

Figure 19 — Anna Chapman, a Cayuse. Photograph by Major Lee Moorhouse, about 1900. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 3073-b-4.

Figure 20 — Studio portrait of young Kansa girl wearing trade silver brooch and earrings. Photographer and date not recorded. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 56834.

Figure 21 — Studio portrait of Mohave (seated) and Maricopa men. Photograph by E. A. Bonine, 1876. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 53507.

Figure 22 — Studio portrait of a Wichita woman. Photograph by William Soule, 1867-74. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 1335-a.

Figure 23 — Lone Bear (Tarlo) in Kiowa costume. His shaven head, however, is more Osage-style than Kiowa. Photograph by William Soule, 1867-74. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 1476-g.

Figure 24 — Lone Bear (Tarlo) in Osage costume including ribbon-work leggings, moccasins and hair-pipe breastplate. Note the stripped light paint over his eyebrows. Photograph by William Soule, 1867-74. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian: 1409-c.