

The adventures of Professor Simon Alexander Wooley,
resident daguerreotypist at The Ohio State University

By Walter Johnson

My story begins in spring of 1965, when I had been asked to come to the home of my employer, Mr. Donald McAlister. Don owned and managed the Don McAlister Camera Shop on West 5th Avenue in Columbus, Ohio, where he would spend hours talking to many of his older photographic friends. I had listened in on these conversations and had quickly become interested in the many stories of their outings.

At Don's home, after visiting with him and his wife for just a few moments, Don invited me to his basement to see his darkroom. The darkroom was large by most standards, completely emptied of the normal darkroom gear, but I remember there were two chairs, a small table, a radio, and all those knotty pine cabinets. Don opened one of the cabinet doors and removed a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label whisky (his favorite drink), and two glasses. He poured drinks, added some ice, and sat next to me.

He then asked if I would accept his personal collection of seven cameras that he had used for many years as an active photographer and as a member of the Columbus Pictorial Society (CPS). I was so taken aback by his offer that I couldn't answer just then. I just asked if I could think it over and get back to him in a day or two. He smiled, said that he understood, and added that I would be welcome back anytime.

Because Don was in his late 70s and would at times suffer memory lapses, I called Pauline, his wife, to discuss Don's generous offer. Pauline quickly assured me that my employer's proposed gift was genuine. That weekend, I returned to the McAlister home and left with the seven cameras, several old photo books, and a beautiful selection of matted photographs taken by Don and other members of the CPS. Little did I realize that in a very short time, I would become the best known collector of photographica in the state of Ohio.

It didn't take long before many people interested in photography learned of my collection of historic cameras and photographic images. Don made certain that all of his old photo buddies knew of my collection and made it clear to them that most of their old cameras had little, if any, value and that they should consider adding them to my collection. Thanks to Don and several helpful antique dealers in the area, my collection grew very quickly to more than 200 cameras and countless other items, including all types of photographic images, books, and anything that could relate to photography.

I began to give presentations on the history of photography, and after the Columbus Dispatch newspaper printed a small piece about my collection in its Sunday edition, I received a call from Dr. Robert Wagner, who asked that I give a presentation for the Department of Photography at The Ohio State University. A few days later, Dr. Wagner followed that request with an offer to join the staff, starting January 1st, 1968.

There was a period of major adjustment in my new job, but after the fall conference of the Photographic Collectors of North America, November 9th, 1968 [the full story is in The Daguerreian Society Newsletter, Vol.18, May-June 2006: "What's Old is New Again, Photography 1968"], photographic history was on everyone's mind in the department, and class 502, The History of Photography became a reality.

Dr. Robert Wagner and I (as his assistant) taught the first 502 class in the fall quarter of 1969. By spring quarter of 1970, I had become the instructor, and I wanted to expand the use of images well beyond the History of Photography slide program the department had purchased from the George Eastman House. In less than a year, I had more than three times the number of slides to show in class, but I still didn't feel that I could convey the full importance of the early years of photography.

While working to improve my classroom efficiency, I had started to work with the Daguerreotype process, using old 9th plates and very crude homemade boxes to sensitize the plates with iodine. After I had exposed the plates, I would hand-hold them over a glass dish containing a small amount of mercury, which was heated by a small, short, candle. (My thanks to Alexander Coffman Ross for his remarks of November 1839. I followed his efforts to

the letter and they worked.) My excitement of seeing for the first time the Daguerreian image is just impossible to convey, but I do remember jumping about, screaming in language not to be repeated.

Two events were to make a major change in my experience with the Daguerreotype process: First was my meeting with Marvin Kreisman and his friend, Jim Ambrecht. We discovered that all three of us were interested in Daguerreotype process, and Jim was intent on building sets of Daguerreotype tools patterned after the originals. . . but better. After some bargaining, I came to terms by my trading my Kodak Hawkeye Stereo camera for a set of Daguerreotype tools to make 4"x5" images.

The second event was Donald Lokuta's arrival. Donald had come to OSU to complete his doctorate degree. He and I hit it off right from the start. Don's interest in the history of photography fit perfectly with my plans to expand and improve the 502 class.

Donald would sit in on many of my classes and made suggestions on how I could best convey the vast amount of information that I wanted my students to hear. At the same time, I spent many hours working to increase my knowledge of the process, using Jim's new Daguerreotype tools. During the summer of 1971, I was able to improve the overall quality of my images to the extent that I felt that I could introduce the process to my class.

I felt that the new material would best be presented with a novel approach; I would dress the part and do a live demonstration of the Daguerreotype process in the classroom. I've always had a thing about names, and many names already known in the photographic world came to mind; names like Victor Griswald, Alexander Coffman Ross, and Hippolyte Bayard. I wanted a name that my students would remember and finally decided I would become the Professor Simon Alexander Wooley.

With the help of several antique dealers, I found a suitable coat and top hat, and in fall quarter of 1971, I introduced my guest speaker to the class. I remember how nervous I was as the day of my demonstration arrived. Donald helped set up the table to hold the Daguerreotype tools, the darkroom safe lights, and the high intensity lamp we would need to view the finished image. We opened the windows behind the screen to create a "negative air" condi-

tion, ensuring an air flow away from the audience. When everything was in place, we covered the table and camera so the arriving students had no hint of what was to about to happen.

I started the class as I would normally, and after a few announcements, I said that a guest speaker would be demonstrating the Daguerreotype process. I turned my back to the students and slipped on the long black coat, fixed the bow tie in place, put on the beaver top hat. Then I turned to the class and introduced myself as the Professor Simon Alexander Wooley, resident Daguerreotypist. As David Bauman remembers:

"I was in that first class in the fall of 1971 when Simon Alexander Wooley made his debut. I'll never forget when you turned your back to the class and became the man".

I expected some smiles and laughter, but I wasn't ready for the response that followed. After the room became quiet again, I removed the cover from the table and for the first time the class saw my working set of Daguerreian tools. The students knew then that this class was going to be something very special.

I started to explain in detail each step of the process, and when I held the iodine box high for the class to see, Donald turned off the lights as we had planned. With only the two darkroom lamps on my work table, I could continue to sensitize the plate. The lamps gave off a soft yellow-green glow; just enough for me to see all of my tools, and just enough light for the students to make out what I was up to. Each time that I went from one sensitizing box to the next, I made certain that the class saw the color changes as the plate became light sensitive. Then I placed the light sensitive plate into a 4"x5" film pack adapter, inserted the filler pad, and closed the back.

I was finally ready for the tripod-mounted camera. I selected a student from the front row, told her of the time required for the exposure, and then commanded her, "Hold still!" After the exposure was completed, I returned to the table and lighted the alcohol lamp under the mercury pot. I explained that the mercury needed to be heated to vaporize to the plate and form the image. I touched the top of the pot from time to time, explaining the very special qualities possessed only by the Daguerreotype image, while comparing the

mercury pot to a passionate woman; you want it warm, but not too hot as to ruin the moment.

I placed the exposed plate in the mercury pot, and after about two minutes, I checked to see if the image was forming. If I had correctly exposed the plate, it should be showing results. If it still had nothing after four minutes -- my demonstration would be a dud.

My first Daguerreotype demo worked. I fixed the plate in common Hypo solution and gave it a brief water bath, followed by a few minutes under a hair drier (not all of my tools were Daguerreian!). I placed the completed image under the high intensity lamp so it could be viewed with ease even with the overhead classroom lights.

I was so concerned with the overall presentation that I had little else on my mind, but after the class had gone and all of my tools had been put away, Donald and I were able to talk about the class. His first reaction was one of wonder that it worked. We both had had our doubts, but we thought that if I could make it work, I would change this class into one where history would come alive. Donald had noticed that once I had started my presentation, all the students were completely with me, interested in every move and word.

No one was laughing now and when it was announced that Professor Wooley was to speak again, the classroom was filled to standing room only. [For more information about Professor Wooley, please check The Daguerreian Society Newsletter, Vol. 18, Sept-Oct, 2006.]

I would continue to offer the Professor Wooley presentations twice a year, and always to a crowded classroom. But with the table full of the Daguerreotype tools, the camera and tripod, lights, and the posing chair, left little room for me to move about. But at the back of the second floor of Haskett Hall there was a large unused area that had once served as a sound stage. I proposed to Dr. Wagner that I could build a movie-style 19th century studio there at little expense, creating the perfect environment for my future Prof. Wooley presentations.

Dr. Wagner gave me the go-ahead, and Donald and I immediately started to plan our Daguerreotype studio/movie set. The "U"-shaped set had high walls

at the back and right sides, and to the left, I wanted a skylight. In a local used furniture shop, I found a wood screen that I thought would work as my skylight and covered it with blue gels to give the impression of how it may have been in the mid-1800's (Daguerreotypes are only blue light sensitive). I owned an original painted backdrop, a plaster posing column, a cast iron head rest, and a Daguerreotype camera with a turned wood tripod -- all in perfect condition. To complete the impression of a working 1850s photographic studio, I also hung several framed Ambrotype and Daguerreotype images.

The much-needed extra space (five times the area of the classroom) allowed me to work with much greater ease than before, and my Daguerreotype demos brought even larger numbers of students to each presentation. Unfortunately, other departmental demands for the use of the sound stage took precedence and brought the Prof. Wooley Daguerreotype demos to a halt.

Meanwhile, I had been approached by several students to teach a class in which they could experience the 19th century photographic processes, with an emphasis on the Daguerreotype and wet-plate (collodion), Ambrotype positive/negative processes. I talked with Donald about the possibility of assisting me with such a class; I knew that it would be too much for one person to control any number of students from the mistakes that I knew they would make. Few students knew of the hazardous chemicals that they would be exposed to and the care required to control them. This was a major concern for me.

Donald and I worked out a plan of instruction where we both could be at hand every time any of the students worked in the designated area in Haskett Hall. The fourth floor was, for the most part, unused, and one large room had two laboratory chemical hoods with exhaust fans. It was ideal for our needs with Daguerreotype and Wet-plate chemicals. The job of cleaning both hoods was one that lasted several days, but once cleaned, they worked even better than expected.

The class, "694G -- Contemporary Photography Using the 19th Century Processes as the Medium" [please check the New Daguerreian Journal, Vol. 2 No. 2 page 18], approved and offered the summer quarter of 1973. It was a five credit-hour class offered to a select group of serious photo students chosen by interview only. We deliberately picked students that we felt would be able to

work well together; selected students would work in two-person teams. No one was to work alone.

Donald and I teamed up to instruct each and every element of the processes and made it clear to our group that each and every time that chemicals were to be mixed, the students were to check, and then check again before proceeding. The lab space became a home away from home for many of us, with a tape player, large fans, and even a cot to sit on while we waited for one of our processes to finish.

Our team system worked progressively better with each day in the lab, but something was missing. The space near the window that we had selected to shoot the images was small and because of its location, we were limited to only a few daylight hours. We needed greater flexibility.

I owned a VW camper van and thought of the possibility of converting it into a portable darkroom for Daguerreotype and wet-plate work (if Mathew Brady could go mobile, so could we). I determined that with red gels to cover the side windows and with the front and back window curtains that had come with the camper, we could have the darkroom we needed just by parking in a shaded area.

I found the gels required in an art supply store, and before you could say “Cheese”, we had converted my VW camper van into a working lab. Our big day arrived, and our class met to decide on a public park that was close to home, allowing us to have as much time to work as possible.

About a hour later, our convoy of five cars and my VW van arrived at a park close to Delaware, Ohio. The table was set up, boxes removed, cameras and tripods opened, and before long, we had started the selection process of who would be first to give our shared adventure a try.

We continued to work as we had in the fourth floor lab space. Each team would agree on who would coat the plate, who would flow the collodion, etc. All in all, I was very impressed by how each team worked in conjunction with the others to prepare or complete an image. I had made it very clear that this class was not a competition; every student who had made a sincere effort

would receive a good grade. I wanted my students to learn it was more important that they help each other, and that time was an ally, not the enemy.

I smile as I recall the screams of anger when a polished Daguerreotype plate would jump from a student's hands and hit the floor, and the questions of why there was no image after a ten second exposure (my film is exposed in 1/100 of a second), and how student after student would ask why when they stood at my side, doing exactly as I would do, they had very different results. I remember the many requests long after the class, to see once again the chemical stains left on the floor and cabinets of my camper van and often to be claimed as their own.

Sadly, this unique experience was one not to be repeated because of the many problems related to the hazardous chemicals required to execute the processes. This class is now history, but remains very real to those students who learned first-hand the effort required to recreate 19th century image making. Those few students now have a personal knowledge of the many issues that faced those uniquely adventurous individuals who, during the 1850s and 1860s, chose to try their hand at photography. I think that one of the most important lessons that could be learned was, be sure to take the time to fully experience all that is before you now, because this opportunity may not happen ever again.

The early 1970s were hard work for me, but I welcomed each day as an adventure and only wished for more hours to experience the joy of the unexpected. Nowadays, I look back on those 20-hour days, packed with twists and turns every hour, on the hour, as my formative years. I was committed to the challenges presented to me, as well as those that I posed for myself. The classroom is where I was to learn the History of Photography; my students were my instructors. I was to welcome with enthusiasm the changes in me both emotionally and intellectually. I expected much, consumed vast amounts of energy, challenged myself and all those about me to own and hold dear the experiences that I knew then would be only too fleeting. To my students; a long delayed, "Thank you".

Rick McKee summed up his impressions of my classroom presence this way:

"You did do some different things in the classroom and exhibitions. That's what made you, YOU! I can say for sure, I never had a better teacher in photography!

You'd come into class dressed up in some 1800s garb and just start spouting about the wonders of this new invention called "photography." The lectures were fun and very informative!

You were able to convey that photography was magical! It happened in the way you talked, and the photos that you showed, and the characters from the past that you embodied. You would reach the main point of your lecture and just pause, and smile. There was a wild twinkle in your eye. The message would hang in the air as we, the students, were left to ponder it and grasp it on our own. You led us to it, showed it to us, but let us come to understand it. It was never forced, just presented in a unique way that only someone who really understood photography's significance, could really do".