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INTRODUCTION

Revisiting *Wyoming Time and Again*

DOI: 10.5876/9781607323051.c000

Between 1890 and 1952, Cheyenne, Wyoming, photographer Joseph Elam Stimson produced more than 7,500 promotional images of Wyoming and the West. He made many of these photographs for his two main employers, the State of Wyoming and the Union Pacific Railroad. During the summer of 1903, he prepared views of the state for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. That year, Stimson traveled throughout Wyoming's then thirteen counties as well as Yellowstone National Park, documenting townscapes, mines, ranches, farms, oil wells, tourist sites, and other places that could help sell the state to would-be investors and settlers. His images, preserved at the Wyoming State Archives in Cheyenne, are stunning. Made with an 8 × 10-inch view camera on glass plates, the photographs are artistically composed and incredibly sharp. They contain a great deal of visual information and can be enlarged over and over to bring out the smallest detail. Many are also one-of-a-kind color pictures Stimson hand painted in an era before color film. Although he made most of his photographs for promotion, their detail means we can also read them as documentary photographs to better understand Wyoming, early photography, and Stimson the artist.

Twice during the last twenty-five years, first as an undergraduate history major at the University of Wyoming in the late 1980s and then again as a history profes-



or twenty years later, I have explored Stimson's work and Wyoming by repeating his images from the same vantage point he used more than a century earlier. This process, called repeat photography or simply rephotography, is a historical tool used to better understand the places, processes, and people who made photographs at an earlier time. Viewed side by side, such before-and-after images illustrate the essence of history—change over time. Like multiple frames of a motion picture, the then-and-now scenes not only illuminate what's in front of the lens—the effects of nature and human action over the course of a century—but also provide hints as to why Stimson composed his original views and how those vantage points fit into today's landscape. Indeed, in many ways rephotography is a personal adventure; as one repeatedly stands in the footsteps of an earlier photographer and repeats scene after scene, the intimate relationships between subject and artist become clearer. We see not only glimpses of another time but also personal expressions of how the photographer understood and tried to relate his views to his audiences.

Rephotography in Wyoming can also suggest broader cultural ideas about the American West over the last century. By looking closely at the images and the processes that created them, a viewer today can see hints of both the Old West and the New West as they play out through history. Along the way, we can discern broader ideas about ecology, historic preservation, photography, urban planning, industrialization, and modernism and postmodernism.

For example, examine the trio of photographs made at the site of the Ferris Hotel in Rawlins. Like many of Stimson's images, this one captures one of the com-



FIGURES 1.1, 1.2, 1.3. Discovering the changes to, and demolition, of the Ferris Hotel in Rawlins, 1903, 1987, 2007.

munity's leading businesses. Named for local entrepreneur George Ferris, the hotel was constructed in 1902 primarily to serve railroad passengers. Stimson visited it in 1903 while photographing Wyoming for the St. Louis Fair the following year. He chose a vantage point diagonal from the hotel, looking northwest, enabling him to capture both sides of the building in what could be called a commercial portrait style—a common technique Stimson often employed when photographing



FIGURES 1.4, 1.5, 1.6. The West Thumb dock site on Yellowstone Lake, photographed in 1907, 1988, and 2008.

businesses. The right front of the building is bathed in sunlight, highlighting the Victorian-style wood siding and the small shops along the street. Zooming in, we can see four people looking at the photographer.

Jump ahead to the second photograph, one I made in the summer of 1987. This view, also from across the corner, shows a dramatic change. Although the Ferris Hotel remained, in 1956 its owners tried to “modernize” the structure by covering it in stucco. When I visited it thirty years later, the small shop windows remained covered. Though no one was present at the site, the automobiles to the left are probably the best hints as to what had happened. With the decline in railroad passenger traffic, the hotel had to appeal to those traveling on the nearby state highway. The large neon sign on the roof shows the attempt to attract such travelers.

Although the changes from 1903 to 1987 were dramatic, when I returned to the site in 2007 I encountered an even more drastic change: the Ferris Hotel was gone! Unable to compete in the new Rawlins featuring interstate travel and too expensive to remodel for other purposes, in the late 1990s the city demolished the structure, leaving an empty lot in its place.

A comparison of these three images serves as a good introduction to this book. Stimson’s original photograph is clearly a promotional image, composed to capture the building in its best light to sell Rawlins as a modern community ready to receive railroad passengers. My first rephotograph suggests the changes from train



to car tourism, the attempts to adapt the old railroad landscape to the new one of the automobile, and the legacy of “modernization” three decades later. My final image made another twenty years later, showing the empty lot, reminds us that the historic built environment of our cities and towns is under constant threat. Moreover, its demise hints at bigger issues, including changing economies and transportation networks and the costs and difficulties of historic preservation.

Another set of images, across the state in Yellowstone National Park, further helps to introduce this book’s concepts. When Stimson visited the park in 1907, he photographed the small steamboat *Zillah* at the thermal features at West Thumb,



FIGURES 1.7, 1.8, 1.9. Preparing for travel, Stimson in 1912 and me in 1987 and 2007.

on the western shore of Yellowstone Lake. This boat, owned by concessionaire E. C. Waters, was not a pleasure boat but actually part of the transportation system in the park's early years. Although most of the familiar Grand Loop road network was in place by this time, actual transportation by stagecoach was very hot and dusty. Travelers going north toward the Lake Hotel could exit the coaches in favor of a smooth, clean boat ride.

In many ways, Stimson's image at this site is also a commercial portrait of an important transportation business in the park. His composition is tight. He placed the boat in mid-frame with the dark waters of the lake offset by the whiteness of the thermal feature on the shore. The passenger ramp slices out of the picture to the right, with a man and a woman on the edge of the picture walking toward the boat, leading the viewer in as well. Steam rises in the foreground, suggesting the wildness of Yellowstone while at the same time the boat and ramp above it hint at human control of that same feature.

My 1988 image suggests a very different meaning for this place. After automobiles were introduced into the park in 1915, tourists quickly lost interest in the stage and boat services. Communal travel gave way to individual car trips, and the West Thumb dock reverted to nature. At the same time, the changing water levels of Yellowstone Lake submerged this feature so that only a portion of it remained to be seen. In short, what had once been a very popular tourist locale no longer existed.

When I returned twenty years later, the scene had changed again. Although the thermal feature remained partially submerged, the site had become a popular access point for water-based tourism. But instead of a passenger boat, individuals paddled kayaks through the scene. Once again, the surface changes suggest deeper



meanings, including the transformation from group to individual tourism as well as the rise of recreation-based experiences.

The final set of pictures to consider here includes self-portraits made by Stimson and myself. The first, taken by Stimson in 1912, shows the photographer and his friend Lem Ellis readying his car for a fishing trip. The view clearly dates the image, with the old Model T-style car strewn with fishing equipment, camping supplies, and what looks like a camera case. The setting is behind Stimson's garage, with the Wyoming capitol building in the distance.

The second view features me packing my car for a 1987 rephotography trip. My 1976 Ford Granada clearly dates this image, and, upon closer examination, photography equipment and camping gear can also be seen scattered about my Laramie apartment parking lot.

The final image, taken in 2007, shows my 2005 Subaru Forester outside my Flagstaff townhouse. Because digital equipment is so much smaller than previous gear, everything is packed away inside the car, including my dog Nellie in the passenger seat.

In addition to the cars and the equipment, which clearly date each image, this triad of photographs serves as an important reminder that photography and rephotography are *personal* endeavors. Although Stimson had paying clients suggesting where he should go or what he might photograph, it remained within his own expertise and personal taste to decide exactly where he wanted to shoot, at what time of day, and how he wanted to frame each image. Likewise, although I had financial support for my research on Stimson, I decided which images I wanted to rephotograph and when I wanted to do them. In both cases, although the final images represent many things about their subjects, each is fundamentally an artistic and cultural expression created by the photographer and thus reflects ideas about how that person conceived and executed his photograph. An old adage suggests that what is behind the camera—the photographer—is as important as what is in front of the camera: the subject. This is especially true in rephotography because the modern images of the same locales offer new hints as to what the original photographer saw and how he made each photograph.

Repeat photography is thus an important tool for exploring history because it provides insight into both places and processes. First, it reminds us of what today's scenes look like and gives us glimpses of what those same places looked like in the past. Second, exploring those places anew helps us see the processes of representation at work both then and now. Combined with historical research and artistic analysis, rephotography can also point to broader understandings of place, image, and history. In these respects, rephotography is a form of visual history akin to oral history. Just as followers of the latter seek out witnesses to past events to record and preserve historical information through recorded interviews, rephotographers hunt for the vantage points of earlier photographers to record and preserve visual information about how landscapes have endured over time.

To accomplish this, this book is organized into three sections. The first, J. E. Stimson, Wyoming, and Me, includes two chapters that describe the history of this project. Chapter 1 begins this process by exploring a detailed professional biography of J. E. Stimson as a Wyoming photographer. Chapter 2 dives into the history of photography and rephotography, explaining the details of how the process worked for me in the 1980s and again in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Part II is called Seeing Anew because it focuses on critical examinations of what this rephotographic project created. Chapter 3 begins at an alpaca ranch south of

Laramie and then explores the global connection the state has always had with the rest of the United States and the world. Chapter 4 starts with the obvious sacred landscape of Yellowstone but then expands on this notion to look at historic preservation throughout the Cowboy State. Chapter 5 takes an intimate look at a beautiful home near the Montana border in Ranchester and shows the relationship between the modernity presented in Stimson's views and the postmodern world represented in my own. The epilogue looks back at the process of rephotography in the digital world before looking ahead to future projects. Throughout the first two sections, references to rephotographic sets are indicated with parentheses, such as (15) for number 15, Castle Dome, Red Buttes Country. A master list of images can be found in the appendix.

The final section of the book presents Stimson's photographs and my rephotographs along with detailed captions and GPS locations. It is broken into seven geographic subsections: the Union Pacific, Fort Laramie Country, the Black Hills, the Big Horns, South Pass, the Bighorn Basin, and Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.