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Junction City Photographer J.J. Pennell

John Pultz

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FOLIO III
JUNCTION CITY PHOTOGRAPHER
J. J. PENNELL
John Pultz

From 1888 to 1922, Joseph Judd Pennell worked as a commercial studio photographer in Junction City, Kansas. During his professional life, Pennell produced some 30,000 glass-plate negatives. As archived in the Kansas Collection of the University of Kansas Libraries, the photographs constitute an important collection, formidable in scope, size, and quality.

For the three decades before Pennell took up photography, the medium had been dominated by the “wet-plate” process, which was arduous and highly unsuitable for work in the field. By the time he opened his studio, a new technology (a combination of dry-plate negatives and gelatin-silver prints) had emerged that made photography simpler and more portable. For the first time it was possible to make photographs away from the darkroom that also possessed the clarity that endowed them with the sense of solidity and three dimensionality demanded by the public.

The same new technology also led to the invention of snapshot photography, letting everyone be a photographer. But even in the face of this encroachment, Pennell and other cameramen were still called upon to record and commemorate life’s monuments and transitions.

Most of Pennell’s pictures were portraits, but for about ten percent of them, the photographer stepped outside the studio, pointing one of his cameras at aspects of life in Junction City and at nearby Fort Riley. When Pennell left the studio to photograph, he did so to make pictures he thought he could sell or ones for which he had been commissioned. Pictures he made to sell on speculation included those of encampments at Fort Riley, which he labeled in the negatives and would sell to soldiers passing through.

Pennell’s pictures all take on new life when we remind ourselves of the collaboration

that went on between the photographer and the subjects in their making. Through the careful use of the wide-angle lens, Pennell made pictures that are masterful in their depiction of space. They not only record the event at hand but also give a clear sense of where it took place. Place itself becomes a subject and conjures up for today’s viewers a sense of Fort Riley at the turn of the twentieth century.

Pennell’s photographs are remarkable. They are handcrafted objects of local origin in an era before snapshot photography became ubiquitous. They are beautiful documents of a former time.

Adapted, with permission, from: “Joseph Judd Pennell and the Era of Commercial Studio Photography,” an essay by John Pultz, in James R. Shortridge, Our Town on the Plains, J. J. Pennell’s Photographs of Junction City, Kansas, 1893-1922 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000)

John Pultz has lived in Kansas for two decades, drawn to the Sunflower State by a visit to the Flint Hills in 1992. An art historian, he writes on American photography since 1940 and teaches the history of art since 1900 at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, where he lives with his wife and three children.



GRANT AVENUE 1898-1899

Well-traveled by soldiers with paychecks in hand, Junction City took great care to maintain this road, paving it with an all-weather macadam surface and lining the route with trees.



CAVALRY PARADE FIELD 1900
*The Sixth Cavalry Band often played in Junction City
and traveled to smaller posts, creating a great deal of good will.*



CAPTAIN WALTER C. SHORT AND OFFICERS 1905
*Cavalry officers, noted for their immaculate personal appearance,
pose in front of the original riding hall.*



SUPPER IN CAMP 1897

Field skills were important to cavalry soldiers, who often patrolled in isolated areas. Soldiers learned to construct shelters from brush and to cook in the field.



TROOPER AT THE STABLES 1909

Meticulous care of horses and equipment were an important part of every cavalryman's training.