

Herman Schnitzmeyer, Flathead Photographer, 1879 – 1939

The opening of the Flathead Indian Reservation to homesteading in 1910 brought many adventurous land-seekers in search of a new life. Among those early arrivals was Herman Schnitzmeyer who promptly settled on 160 acres on Wildhorse Island in Flathead Lake.

Schnitzmeyer had left his native Illinois where he was born in Centralia on November 1, 1879, the son of German immigrant parents. As a young man he had become interested in photography, eventually operating a commercial studio in Nashville, Illinois for eight years before heading west.

Full of idealism, Schnitzmeyer named his homestead “Apollo Heights” and set about planting and building, but spent more time philosophizing as he was by nature a dreamer, not a farmer.

By 1912, Schnitzmeyer was again producing photographs to supplement his income and joined in partnership with fellow homesteader Louis Desch. Together they sold real photo postcards of the local area.

In 1915, having “proved up” on his island homestead, Schnitzmeyer moved to Polson where he returned to photography as a full time profession and opened the Polson Studio.

After gaining a favorable reputation and some local notoriety, in 1917 he sold his Wildhorse Island holdings to Henry Bierman, a Kalispell meat marketer and dedicated his energies to capturing scenic views. It is this quest that inspired him most and occupied his interest for the remainder of his career.

Herman Schnitzmeyer has been characterized by those who knew him as “eccentric”, “a perfectionist”, “a genius with a camera”, “a philosopher”, “a rugged individualist”, and ultimately “an artist”. In spite of these qualifications for greatness, Schnitzmeyer and his work have remained relatively unknown outside the Flathead Valley and Western Montana.

Several reasons for this lack of national recognition can be postulated.

As a photographer, Schnitzmeyer was far more interested in capturing the perfect image than in self-promotion. He would often spend hours getting just the right lighting and cloud formations, a trait that produced spectacular photos, but did not contribute to prolific productivity. He was particularly noted for a lack of business sense and failure to keep regular studio hours.

Much of the local marketing effort was left to his friend and partner Louis Desch, who hand-tinted Schnitzmeyer's images, adding the element of color, and selling wholesale lots to retailers around Montana.

Secondly, Schnitzmeyer operated in the same time and place as renowned Glacier Park photographer Tomar J. Hileman, who was heavily promoted by both the Park and Great Northern Railroad. Hileman himself was a successful businessman with the foresight to retain the copyrights on his scenic photos.

Thirdly, in 1926, Schnitzmeyer sold much of his equipment along with many scenic views and negatives to Johan W. Rode, a Polson acquaintance, who first issued prints with the ink stamp "J.W. Rode, Polson, Mont. Successor to H. Schnitzmeyer".

Later, Rode copyrighted and produced these photos under his own name, marketing them as "Scenic American Views" and selling from his headquarters in Berkley, California, Rode often changed the original photo titles assigned by Schnitzmeyer to captions of his own choosing. Rode also produced massive enlargements which far exceeded Schnitzmeyer's limited print size capabilities.

Finally, when Herman Schnitzmeyer took free-lance assignments offered by the Northern Pacific Railroad, the copyrights on his work and negatives were often retained by his employer. These were used in promotional publications and as documentation of railroad infrastructure.

Regardless of the reasons for the relative obscurity of Herman Schnitzmeyer and his work, his photographic contributions continue to inspire us and provide a valuable insight to the history and scenic beauty of Western Montana, elevating moments in time to timeless works of art.

This exhibit presents a sampling of the photographic vision of Herman Schnitzmeyer, the color enhancements of Louis Desch, and the marketing acumen of Johan W. Rode. The cumulative impact of their efforts provides viewers with a deeper understanding of the early 20th century Flathead Valley and a continuing appreciation for the unsurpassed scenic views still enjoyed today.

"The creative mind is the real and genuinely strong mind." Herman Schnitzmeyer
Journal entry

"Photography is 90 percent man, 10 percent equipment." H. Schnitzmeyer to apprentice Julius Meiers

Special thanks to Paul Fugelberg for Schnitzmeyer biographical publications and research assistance.