Report of the Convocation of Latter Day Daguerreans

July 9, 10, 11, 1976

Despite the fact that the Daguerreotype process went out of fashion in the late 1850's, there has always been someone in the United States, since that time, who has practiced this entrancingly beautiful process. In the present day there is growing interest in the process and there are now more daguerreans working than there has been in the last one-hundred years. Although their numbers are very small in comparison to the practitioners of modern photographic processes, their ranks are very much on the increase.

Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre passed from this world on 10 July, 1851. It surely would have made him happy to know that one-hundred and twenty-five years later to the day, his memory would still be very much alive and celebrated in the form of image making by the process he had devoted so much of his energies to invent.

Over a three day period (July 9, 10, 11) sixteen people from eight different states gathered in Staten Island, New York, in response to a national call for daguerreans to convene for the purpose of furthering the present state of the art, undoubtedly a unique event in this century.

The idea for the meeting evolved out of a discussion between three modern daguerreotypists in February. Harvey Zucker of New York travelled to Rochester for the opening of the exhibition of the daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes, held at George Eastman House. Over one-hundred masterpieces of the work of these renowned daguerreotypists were on display and surely daguerrean bees would be drawn to such honey. However, Rochester seems to be the site of the hive, with more daguerreotypists in residence than any other city. Harvey met at this occasion with Irving Pobboraysky, Grant Romer, and Mark Stebbins. Irv is the recognized grand-master of modern daguerreotypy, something of a daguerrean-guru, to whom the novices flock for guidance. Grant is an intern at IMP/GEH specializing in the history of the Daguerreotype. Mark is an undergraduate photo-science student at R.I.T.

For the time Harvey was in Rochester, the group took every opportunity to talk Daguerreotype, for the event of a visiting fellow-daguerrean is rare. One of the major topics of discussion centered on the lack of opportunity that exists for modern daguerreotypists to communicate and exchange information. Although many have tried their hand at the process (over forty individuals in America, alone, according to a survey taken by Grant) few have been successful. There are perhaps twelve in the world who have mastered the process well enough to regularly produce images which do not tax the imagination to recognize it as a daguerreotype. The process can be extremely dangerous and at the same time expensive because the specialized apparatus and plates are not commercially available. Therefore, these
items must be fabricated by the aspiring daguerreotypist before any attempt can be made. The situation is very much the same as it was for the very first individuals to attempt the process in the 1840's, who had only a manual in hand and the desire to work the magic of Daguerre. One of the largest single factors that retards the progress of modern daguerreotypy is the lack of the exchange of information between individuals working with the medium. Most have worked in isolation, unaware of the efforts of others and their achievements in refining the tools and techniques required. The enjoyable stimulus of comradeship experienced at this gathering by Grant, Harvey, Irv, and Mark made them more acutely aware of the need for a greater opportunity to gather to exchange information.

Mr. Zucker, became especially enthusiastic about the idea for a national meeting and with Grant began to plan the event. Over the next months they contacted fellow daguerreans and sent out press releases to numerous national and international photographic publications. The response to the call was vigorous, with inquiries coming from all over the country and Europe.

Although the meeting was originally conceived to be for practicing daguerreotypists only, it was decided that the meeting should be open to all who has any interest in working with the process. Despite the difficulties of finding time and funds for travel, sixteen individuals from eight different states converged upon Harvey's house in Staten Island. The hardcore in attendance were: Scott Hendricson and Mary Serra, New Mexico; Thomas Young, Jr., Colorado; Frederick Birkhill, Michigan; Walter Johnson, Ohio; Ken Partymiller, Pennsylvania; Mark Stebbins and George Skelly, New Jersey; Cecil Reed, Virginia; L. Erik Van Cort, Anthony Kiburis, Grant Romer, and Harvey Zucker, New York. Others attended one day only.

The background of the group was varied. Mr. Zucker and Mr. Johnson are well known in the field of photo-history, both being influential in the founding of organized collector groups in the early 1960's. Harvey was past President of Photographic Historical Society of New York and presently is Technical Editor of Penthouse Photo-World. Walter was the founder and editor of the extremely valuable New Daguerrean Journal, which regrettably is now in limbo. Walter is presently a professor of the history of photography at The Ohio State University. Both are accomplished practitioners of other antique processes and possessors of notable collections of photographica. Mr. Birkhill and Mr. Kiburis are also accomplished tintypists. Fred was the operator of the tintype studio at the Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, and Tony is presently the operator of the American Tintype Gallery, which is a commercial wet-plate collodion establishment operating out of an original itinerant photographer's wagon on display at IMP/GEH. Tony offers a variety of antique photographic apparatus in reproduction as well as wet-plate chemicals and supplies. George Skelly is a research chemist and a collector of photographic apparatus. Ken Partymiller is a graduate chemistry student and a dealer of rare photographic books. Scott Hendricson and Mary Serra were students of Beaumont Newhall's. Thomas Young is in the contracting business and holds a degree in Philosophy. Erik Van Cort is a professional photographer. Cecil Reed is an archeologist and Grant Romer has a fine arts background.
Neither Harvey or Grant felt that it was right for them to impose any great structure on the gathering and so the affair was held in an informal manner with group dynamics taking it where it might. It was their intent to provide the opportunity for daguerreotypists to meet in the hope that an organization would evolve out of the event.

The first day of the convocation was extremely exciting for all. The morning was spent in meeting each other by examining examples of work. The variety of images was as wide as it could be and those who did not bring work to show had other goodies to delight with. Harvey Zucker showed both daguerreotypes and tintypes of sundry subjects: portraits, landscapes, cityscapes, and figure studies. Walter Johnson showed daguerreotype portraits and nudes, including an image made on a silvered front surface mirror. He had a landscape which was indistinguishable from a nineteenth century product. He also had examples of his ambrotype work. Grant Romer showed still-lifes and architectural views, including an image made by Becquerel development, without the use of mercury. Irving Pobboravsky, who was unable to attend, sent examples of his portraits and landscapes which won the admiration of all. Scott Hendricson and Mary Serra, who work as a team, exhibited three small landscapes. Mark Stebbins had with him two daguerreotype curiosities of his production; a contact print from a regular negative upon a sensitized daguerreotype plate and an image made upon a half-dollar, of the former high silver content, which had been ground flat and polished. Thomas Young had portraits and landscapes which were very beautiful and all the more amazing when he told the group that he had seen only three daguerreotypes besides his own before coming to the meeting. Tom had made his first daguerreotypes without ever having seen an example. He used the original process of Daguerre, which he read in a reprint of Towler's *Silver Sunbeam*. Daguerre's polishing methods were not the best and Tom's images lacked the finesse of typical daguerreotypes. When he finally encountered a good example of the art he realized the problem, bought a copy of Humphrey's *American Hand Book of the Daguerreotype*, and soon was producing the fine examples he exhibited. Those familiar with what the process entails will marvel at such an extra-ordinary achievement.

Tony Kiburis brought with him six posing headstands which he has reproduced from an original in the IMP/GEH collection. These peculiar cast-iron contraptions are great rarities today, much sought after by collectors. They were used to steady the head of a sitter during the camera exposure which were far from instantaneous. Photographers required this piece of studio furniture up until the 1890's and modern practitioners of old processes need them also. Tony has done a great job in producing an accurate reproduction and a great service in making this item commercially available again.

The fine hand-craft aesthetic is very much with modern daguerreans. L. Erik Van Cort gave further evidence of this by displaying photographs of his reproduction half-plate daguerreotype camera. Erik had succeeded through perseverance of effort in achieving the daguerrean collectors dream of finding an original daguerreotype camera. Erik located it in an antique shop in New England. He made a set of plans from the original camera and set about having an exact
copy of it fashioned down to the smallest detail. All the work was done in the same fashion and materials as in the nineteenth century. The brass focusing screw was turned to the exact number of threads as the original by an old machinist. This part alone cost $250. The result of this effort was to produce what amounts to a new Anthony half-plate daguerreotype camera. Erik has had a second one made and intends to continue work until he has a complete daguerreotype outfit: camera, tripod, fuming boxes, mercury bath, gilding stand, buff wheel, etc. It is his dream to set up a daguerrean portrait studio, complete in every detail, in San Francisco.

All of these interesting items and the stories surrounding them swirled around the group in the morning hours. The afternoon was given over to a group discussion about specific problems confronting the modern daguerreotypist. The topics of safety methods and the physical symptoms of mercury poisoning were given particular attention. It was heartily agreed upon by all that every effort should be taken in excercising caution in working with iodine, bromine, chlorine, and metallic mercury. Fuming boxes should be as air tight as possible. All activities should be conducted in a fume hood. Some of the workers wear rubber gloves and goggles throughout the mixing of chemicals and fuming. Space does not allow the recounting of all that was mentioned on this topic. However, anyone wishing to undertake the process is advised to give much study to the dangers involved before beginning.

Grant Romer brought up the fact that there is quite a tradition of devotion to the process and gave anecdotes of some of the groups ancestors. A bibliography of daguerreotype literature was suggested. The two most valuable texts being:


Ken Partymiller offered his dealer's discount of 20% off to the convocation participants on the Arno books. Arno Press books can be ordered by mail directly. Arno Press, 330 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

Perhaps the single most important achievement of the discussion was the evolving of a standard form of recording daguerreotype exposure information. Such a system makes it possible for individuals to compare experiments and results even though widely separated. It is also a untold value to practice such note taking for oneself. Walter Johnson has done a lot of work in teaching antique processes and has evolved very sound methods of working. It was he who originally presented xerox copies of the form he uses in his work. Using this as a basis the group added those things which they thought would be further of value to be recorded. The result, which is appended to the report, was highly satisfactory to all.

The first day's events carried far over into the evening and it developed into something of a party. The second day was given over to practical demonstrations of individual working methods. Because of the large amount of bulky equipment required for polishing, sensitizing and development, the process does not lend itself to
travel. It is also very much a necessity to tune into the process and conditions with every attempt. The entire group realized that under the conditions it would be a miracle if anyone succeeded in producing any image. Rather than strive for making a perfect image, those who demonstrated their equipment and working methods tried instead to give educational pointers. In this they were most successful, the one most successfully demonstrated daguerrean lesson being: one learns from one's mistakes.

Harvey Zucker, Tom Young and Grant Romer each occupied a ring of the ensuing daguerrean circus. Harvey showed a very valuable display of his equipment, including a number of ingenious, but unsuccessful designs for fuming boxes and mercury baths. The design of his present mercury bath was of particular interest. It is heated by light bulbs and thermostatically controlled to maintain the proper temperature. Harvey's fuming boxes resemble the traditional American design, employing Wolcott's mixture as the "Quick." Tom Young's fuming boxes and mercury bath are more like the European design. Grant Romer had only his iodizing box, which was of a design all its own. The opportunity to view this variety of equipment was invaluable to all, particularly to those who are just beginning to experiment.

Polishing methods and plate cleaning techniques, which can only be mastered through much practice, were demonstrated and helpful hints were given. The problems of travelling with equipment was illustrated by the condition of Tom Young's polishing wheels. The drop in pressure in the baggage compartment of the airplane in which he travelled caused moisture to secrete from the wooden box that contained the buffs, thus ruining them. Both Tom and Harvey polish their plates by using an electric motor to turn cloth polishing wheels charged with rouge. Grant polishes his plates by hand using hand buffs covered with cotton velvet.

Each had plates of different manufacture, which very much effect the variables of the process. Plates are made on special order from commercial platers, whose prices and working methods differ widely. When a good product is obtained it can polish with much greater ease than other plates and be three times faster, yet there is no guarantee that you will get the same product the next time you order. There is a most acute need amongst modern daguerreotypists to find a reliable source of quality plates. A number of the participants said they will give future efforts to solving this problem.

Grant made exposures which he developed using the Becquerel phenomenon. After exposing the iodized plate in the camera, he exposed the plate to sunlight through a yellow filter. As if by magic, a negative image gradually began to appear. As it intensified, it turned positive and when exhibited was of an intense greenish-blue hue. The image will fade away if the fixing solution contains absorbed oxygen and this Grant demonstrated to the amazement of the onlookers. Grant made the point that the daguerreotype holds potentials undeveloped in the nineteenth century. The process was dropped before the aesthetics and science of photography had developed very far. The nature of the daguerreotype process makes also for a lot of room for the hand of the individual to figure in the final image quality. Plates
can be fumed to different degrees, exposed and developed by a variety of methods, gilded to different hues. The plate can be selectively sensitized, developed, erased, re-sensitized and exposed. Very few people realize the range of possibilities there are for the daguerreotype.

The exposures of the day did not compare with the standard of the three usual work. The most successful image of the day was a portrait of Grant made by Tom Young. Grant made portraits of Mark Stebbins and a visiting journalist. Harvey produced a number of interesting images, in particular a group portrait, but they were all unfortunately marred by spots of undetermined origin.

After the two day torrent of information and whirlwind of activity, which must surely have mystified Harvey's neighbors, most of the participants bid goodbye to their fellows and started on the journeys home. On Sunday, 11 July, Tom Young, Scott Hendricson, Mary Serra, Grant Romer and Harvey Zucker met and took stock of the past days happening. Harvey most generously made gifts of daguerreotypes from his collection to Tom, Scott and Mary, who rarely encounter examples of the art in their part of the country. Harvey also gave Grant a particularly beautiful portrait he admired. The entire group owes Harvey a great vote of thanks for his efforts, hospitality, and generosity which made the meeting a possibility and a delight.

The meeting was far from being a dream come true for modern daguerreotypists. If anything, it pointed out the need of establishing an effort of more than one or two individuals in order to have a meeting that is something more than a free for all. Undoubtedly, everyone gained from the experience, yet all hungered for more. To Grant and Harvey the experiment was a success for this reason. It is hoped that this event will hasten the day when the dream does come true and there is established a society of daguerreans, with a central information library, a yearly publication of practical information and experimental results, annual meetings and exhibitions, all towards the end of bringing modern daguerreotype production up to the quality level of the nineteenth century. Anyone who knows the beauty of the Daguerreotype realizes the impetus for such an effort.

Out of this meeting have come a number of individuals who are willing to give their efforts towards this end. Another, more structured meeting is now being planned for next year. There will be a speaker's program, and ample dark room space with proper ventilation for a number of demonstrators. Walter Johnson has offered the possibility of The Ohio State University being the site of the meeting and the repository of daguerreotype information. In the near future there will be more information on the next planned meeting.

Anyone wishing to contact the group can write to any of the following:

Grant B. Romer, c/o IMP/GEH
900 East Avenue
Rochester, New York 14607

Harvey Zucker
13 Dongan Street
Staten Island, New York 10310

Walter Johnson
Department of Photography and Cinema
The Ohio State University
156 West 19th Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43210
This list does not intend to represent itself as a complete tally of modern workers. What it represents is the individuals known to the group who have expressed an interest in communicating with others who are serious about making daguerreotypes. Anyone wishing to have their name included in future lists should contact Grant Romer.

James Ambrecht  
4842 Sunnyview Drive  
St. Louis, Mo. 63128

Roger Baker, Jr.  
Box 7854  
U.T. Station  
Austin, Texas 78712

C. S. Duckworth  
2948 Neil Avenue  
Apt. 223 B  
Columbus, Ohio 43202

Walter Johnson  
Dept. of Photog. and Cinema  
The Ohio State University  
156 West 19th Avenue  
Columbus, Ohio 43210

John B. Kennard  
4970 Pershing Place  
St. Louis, Mo. 63108

Tony Kiburis  
18 Portsmouth Terrace  
Rochester, New York 14607

Cliff Krainik  
Graphic Antiquity  
Drawer 1234  
Arlington Heights, Illinois 60005

Marvin Kreisman  
Ringling House  
Baraboo, Wisconsin 53913

John LaBarbera  
Box 11  
Bluff Point, New York 14417

Donald Lokuta  
Industrial Studies Department  
Kean College of New Jersey  
Union, New York 07083

Harvey Zucker  
13 Dongan Street  
Staten Island, New York 10310

J. Richard Malpass  
5, Birches Fold,  
Coal Aston,  
Sheffield, S18 6AG, ENGLAND

Chris Odgers  
2580 North Mountain Avenue  
Claremont, California 91711

Ken Partymiller  
411 Waupelani Drive  
C-133  
State College, Pa. 16801

Irving Pobborovsky  
835 Crittenden Road  
Rochester, New York 14627-3

James Rantala  
950 South Highland  
Dearborn, Mich. 48124

Grant Romer  
453 Pearl Street  
Rochester, New York

George Skelly  
52 Winding Lane  
Basking Ridge, New Jersey 07920

Mary Serra & Scott Hendricson  
1202 Wilmore S.E.  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106

Mark Stebbins  
Box 1113  
25 Andrews Memorial Drive  
Rochester, New York 14623

Shinkichi Tajiri  
Castle Scheres  
Baarlo (Limburg)  
The Netherlands

Thomas Young, Jr.  
494 Arapahoe Street  
Boulder, Colorado 80302
Thoughts on Safety

From what I have been able to gather, one should not think that the mercury in the daguerreotype process is the biggest danger. The iodine, bromine, and chlorine are all highly poisonous and corrosive. All must be handled with the utmost caution. This does not mean that they cannot be used safely. When preparing these chemicals for use in the process, it is advisable to wear rubber gloves, apron and goggles to protect the eyes. Any breathing, especially prolonged breathing, should be avoided. Mixing and charging should be done outside if possible. Chemicals and charged fuming boxes and mercury bath should be stored in airtight containers when not in use, preferably not in your living quarters, and in a well ventilated place. They also should not be placed where someone ignorant of their contents may accidentally come upon them. The fuming boxes and the mercury bath must be made as airtight as possible so that their contents do not leak out. All operations with the mercury bath should be conducted in a fume hood so that the mercury vapor is drawn off. Mercury, iodine, bromine, and chlorine all vaporize considerably at room temperature. The effects of iodine, bromine and chlorine are immediately noticeable since the mucous membranes are first attacked. Keep on hand a bottle of ammonia, which combines with the fumes of the three chemicals and renders them relatively harmless. A dish of ammonia kept near the bromine when preparing it for sensitizing visibly combines with the red gas to produce a white vapor. Ammonia can be used to neutralize spills in the same fashion. The effects of mercury poisoning are insidious and not noticeable until considerably advanced. The early signs of mercury poisoning are irritability, loosening of the teeth, and painful swelling of the limbs. It is possible to get tests for mercury in your system through your doctor. The test is called a Mercury Screen, consult with your family physician about it. It is a good idea to periodically have one done.

A fume hood can be constructed out of plywood, plexiglass and a bathroom exhaust fan. All seams should be sealed and the draft should be such to evacuate the chamber rapidly.

There is a great need for you to investigate the nature of the chemicals you are using. A trip to the library to consult books on chemistry and medicine will reveal much to you and give you a healthy respect for the value of being scrupulously careful. Do not rush into making daguerreotypes and do not be lazy about being disciplined in your operations. You may be endangering others as well as yourself by not paying strict attention to safety.

If you do evolve a technique or equipment which you find to be successful, please, by all means, let other workers know about it.

One last comment. The design of nineteenth century daguerreotype equipment, particularly the mercury bath, leaves much to be desired in terms of safety. Do not be content with merely reproducing a close approximation of old equipment.
Daguerreotype Exposure Record

Exposure Identification No._____

1. Plate size:  1/9  1/4  1/2  1/1  Other (   )

2. Fuming:  Operating temperature:  °(C,F)
   1st Iodine:  Accelerator:  2nd Iodine:  

3. Time lapse between sensitizing and camera exposure:

4. Subject description:

5. Camera exposure:  sec. @ f.

6. Lighting Description:

7. Meter Reading, EV# off grey card:

8. Time Lapse between exposure and development:

9. Development:  Mercury (    )  Becquerel (    )
   Operating temperature:  Exposure time:

10. Fixing method:

11. Gilding:

12. Additional notes and observations:

Any exchange of information sheets should be accompanied by a full description of
equipment, giving measurements in metric values, and any other pertinent informa-
tion on plates, polishing methods, etc.