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The Evolution of a Tourist Landscape

Wet Plate Collodion Photographs of the Wisconsin Dells
in the twenty-first century

By: Nick Olson
2008

A modern traveler of Wisconsin most often experiences the landscape through the windows of a car: shut in, listening to the latest hits on the radio, traveling at 70 miles per hour through rolling corn fields in the central part of the state. In this state of mind one cannot learn in-depth what potential experience the landscape has to offer. Of course the experience of an asphalt path flying by underneath is a reality in itself but other possible ways to experience the landscape exist. Along all roads, a plethora of billboards distract the traveler from the space through which they are passing. Yet in the middle of Wisconsin, signs can be found advertising the landscape of the Wisconsin Dells as being "World Famous," hopefully directing the attention of drivers to the landscape around them. One sign displays the slogan "The World Famous Wisconsin Dells" written over a photograph created by H.H. Bennett of an exotic rock formation. While the the modern Wisconsin Dells is still located on the Wisconsin River near geologically significant rock formations that were once photographed by H.H. Bennett, the Dells has transformed into an exotic twenty-first century tourist town. Through my work, I show how the format of the constructed landscape affects people's perceptions of and interactions with the natural landscape. Changes in the built landscape have caused people's relationship with the natural landscape to also change.

The beginning of my personal experience with the Wisconsin Dells followed the typical contemporary behavior of a tourist. My family traveled to the Dells by car passing billboards, which brought our attention to the land but advertised the land as a consumable commodity instead of something to be appreciated. Being a child, I ignored anything that wasn't related to the adventure theme parks. In my mind the Dells was a

world famous landscape because of the water slides that wandered through the space around giant sculptures of figures like Poseidon and Paul Bunyan. This rationale made sense as a kid, but as time passed I came to wonder why such a strange place exists and what qualifies the area as “World Famous”.

I found the answers to my questions in the photographs of H.H. Bennett, who started working in 1865 and stayed in the area photographing until his death on January 1, 1908.¹ His aim was to create photographs with views that demonstrated how the landscape was beautiful and conformed to society’s new demands of the land as a place of leisure. In the past, the American landscape had been viewed as a harsh and unforgiving wilderness. Even at the time, photographers on western frontier surveys depicted the land as ominous and dangerous and not a place for a vacation. Timothy O’Sullivan depicted the landscape “as a hostile place where one must struggle to survive.”² At the same time in history, Bennett’s images show the Dells in a very different light; he wanted to represent them “as a place where nature conforms to the contours of leisure and civility”.³ He portrayed the landscape in this manner by including people at leisure in his photographs; people sit on scenic cliffs in Victorian clothing, and children play in Sunday clothing next to the river while awaiting a picnic. The people are always shown escaping from their everyday realities while safely enjoying themselves. The scenes imply how the natural landscape can change from a place where safety is uncertain to a manageable place. This noticeable change was an important fact in getting people to travel outside their regular environments. Because Bennett interpreted

¹ Rath, Sarah. *Pioneer Photographer Wisconsin’s H.H. Bennett*. Madison: Tamarack Press, 1979.

² Hirsch, Robert. *Seizing The Light: A History of Photography*. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 152.

³ Bamberger, Tom & Marvel, Terrence. *A Sense of Place H.H. Bennett*. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1992

how people were supposed to approach the landscape as a commodity to be consumed visually, the photographs were purchased by the train companies and shown as advertisements in their stations and publications to attract tourists from the surrounding metropolitan areas of Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis.⁴

The advertisements worked, capturing the interest of an audience of potential travelers and created an increase in the annual number of visitors to the area. The boom in the tourist industry advanced by factors such as the industrial revolution, which led to the creation of a large middle class with free time. At the same time railroads created greater ease in transportation allowing people to get to the Dells from the cities quickly. The industry has continued to draw people to the area throughout the entire twentieth century right up to the present. A lot of changes have occurred since Bennett photographed the area, due to social and cultural factors of the late nineteenth and the entire twentieth century.

H.H. Bennett worked in the wet plate collodion process, which is complicated, time consuming, and often creates flawed results. This photographic process was invented in 1851 by Fredrick Scott Archer and became the dominant process of the nineteenth century.⁵ The process requires the photographer to coat the supporting material, sensitize, expose, develop, and fix the plate all while it is still wet. Depending on the weather and climate in which the photographer is working, drying times range from five minutes to fifteen.⁶ The short drying time makes it imperative that the processing be done on location. The process can be carried out on three different types of support, each creating their own visual effects. H.H. Bennett worked with the glass

⁴ Rath, Sarah. *Pioneer Photographer Wisconsin's H.H. Bennett*. Madison: Tamarack Press, 1979.

⁵ Hirsch, Robert. *Seizing The Light: A History of Photography*. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 72.

⁶ Coffer, John. *The Doer's Guides to Wet-Plate Photography*. Dundee: Camp Tintype, 2000.

negatives, because he could then reproduce his images for sale to tourists for a profit. To create an image, collodion is flowed over the support material, and the collodion becomes the vehicle for the light sensitive silver salts. Once the entire surface is covered with collodion, the plate is submerged inside a silver nitrate bath. The material becomes light sensitive when the halogens in the vehicle come in contact with the silver nitrate, all of which is done inside a dark box.⁷ Once sensitized the plate is loaded into a light tight plate holder, which can be transported in the light to the camera. Once in the camera the plate is exposed to light by opening and closing the shutter. In Bennett's case making an exposure often meant removing a lens cap for a certain number of seconds, the length of which is estimated based on factors such as how much light is available. Once exposed the plate is transported back to the dark box and developed. The developer causes a reduction of the silver to a metallic state, at which point the plate can be exposed to the light without destroying the image. The image is then fixed with a solution of potassium cyanide, dried, and varnished to protect the surface.⁸ This process is time consuming and requires a lot of equipment and energy on the part of the photographer. H.H. Bennett used this medium because it was the dominant process at the time, but also because the qualities of the process captured the Dells in a way desirable to Bennett.

The form and layout of a landscape reveals the orientation of the experience in the Dells. My photographs show the landscape in its present form, which causes my photographs to greatly contrast to those of Bennett. By showing how the form of the landscape has changed, the images inform the viewer as to how people must interact

⁷ Eastbrooke, E.M. *Photography in the Studio and Field*. New York: E. & H. T. Anthony & Co., 1886.

⁸ *Ibid.*

with the landscape differently than previous generations. The people in Bennett's photographs travel by rowboats or ferries, orienting their experience towards the river and the rock formations. Today people travel in large cars on paved roads, which causes their experience to focus on the radio, stoplights, billboards, casinos, and other strange tourist attractions. People no longer have any great amount of involvement with the land around them. What they do have involvement with is depicted in my pictures: parking lots, a Trojan horse, mannequins, and ticket booths. All of these things are real but lack in a gratifying substance which the land can provide.

The photographs I have created are made with the same wet plate collodion process that H.H. Bennett used. The antiquarian method, which is outside of mainstream digital imaging process, allows me to express a critical perspective. The visual qualities of wet plate photographs differ from digital photos. Viewers are forced to see a contemporary subject in a different way. The prints in this body of work have a post-apocalyptic appearance in some cases, amplifying the lack of substance. The new perspective should capture the viewer's interest as to why these places exist and question whether there are any redeeming qualities worth seeking out in this landscape. My interest in the process was driven by the great difference between Bennett's photographs and contemporary tourist photographs of the rock formations. A great difference exists between the two, and I find the contemporary ones strange because the landscape Bennett focused on is no longer important to the tourist.

The process, which has become important for my perspective, had been dominant in the nineteenth century. However, the invention of dry plates and later gelatin films, which don't require processing on location, caused the wet plate process

to be abandoned. The new processes became dominant because they required carrying less equipment into the field, making photography more versatile, required less processing, and were easily reproduced. The wet plate process was not lost forever, though. In the past 20 to 30 years there has been a revival of the process because of an interest from two groups: civil war re-enactors and artists. One of the main figures in the wet plate collodion renaissance is master tintypist John Coffey. Coffey is internationally known as the leading expert in the field of tintype photography. Coffey became involved with the process because of his interest in practicing the process in a completely authentic manner while participating in Civil War reenactments. He traveled the country as a nineteenth century traveling photographer would have in a horse and wagon. On his travels he found old manuals and first hand documents from nineteenth century practitioners, which provided him knowledge of the process.⁹ Coffey has since stopped traveling and settled down on a piece of rural land in upstate New York, where he still makes his artwork. He finds the process to be more revealing and rewarding than any modern process. As he says “people can’t hide behind that quick smile”. He wrote an instructional manual, which has become the ultimate source for any twenty-first century practitioner. During the summer months, he teaches a series of workshops on the process. Coffey became an important figure in my project because I had no experience working in the process. After a series of hand-written correspondences with him, I worked as his assistant for the summer of 2007. This job involved living a lifestyle of the nineteenth century, without plumbing, electricity, or telephone. Being completely off the grid and living as if we were in another century gave me a new perspective on contemporary society and photography. Living without the color saturated

⁹ Coffey, John. *The Doer's Guides to Wet-Plate Photography*. Dundee: Camp Tintype, 2000.

advertisements, consumer objects, television ads, and the Internet made me more sensitive to their existence and how they completely saturate our daily lives and prey on our most basic desires. With this heightened sensitivity, I have come to appreciate more than just the visual quality of the wet plate collodion images; I now appreciate the hands on nature of the process, its slow speed, and how revealing it can be with its subject matter. It is with the knowledge of the process and the nineteenth century perspective of H.H. Bennett that I approach the landscape of the Wisconsin Dells.

This approach allows me to consider the implications of time and place while critiquing the cultural shifts of the twentieth century. Although my work does depict scenes encountered by the modern tourist, it does not try to capture them in the same way as a modern tourist would. The modern tourist approaches the Dells in a way dictated by how the landscape is arranged and also through the technology of contemporary society. The tourist has an instantaneous mindset fueled by fast cars and digital cameras. The modern experience involves driving from one parking lot to another in search of the most bizarre sight, documenting their faces in front of the place, while often cropping out the landscape. The wet plate collodion process allows me to slow down and invest more time and energy into a single image. This investment forces me to contemplate the subject and its significance along with how decisions about my photographic approach will help create a strong image. Therefore, my images focus on how the landscape is formed, depicting the open space of parking lots next to all the attractions. If these parking lots did not exist, the tourist would be forced to experience the landscape in a very different way. Without parking, tourists would have to walk on foot or bike, which may repel some people. Although my photographs critique this time

and place, people may still find beauty and attraction to the Dells. My photographs show how that landscape still exists but how people have given it up in favor of a new man-made landscape that conforms increasingly to the comforts and leisure of modern society.

The work of H.H. Bennett, the nineteenth century lifestyle, the wet plate collodion process, and John Coffey have all had an influence on how I create my work. John Coffey and his lifestyle have allowed me to approach society from a new and more informed perspective. The wet plate process allows me to contemplate whatever subject matter I am approaching in more depth. The work of H.H. Bennett sparked my interest in the area of the Dells and how society has changed the area. Bennett depicted the landscape conforming to the leisure of society, and my photographs demonstrate how the landscape no longer fits with the leisure of society; society has constructed a new, hyper-real landscape conforming to current fast paced expectations.¹⁰ These photographic works may beautify the landscape and make it an appealing place to travel while at the same time remain critical of the time and place. The viewer is ultimately left to interpret them in their own way.

¹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London: Verso, 1988.

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Nick Olson:
The Evolution of a Tourist Landscape
Mudd Gallery, Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin
April 18 – April 30, 2008
Exhibition Checklist

Romance Cliff

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
27" w x 35" h
2008

Bennett's New Landscape

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
35" w x 27" h
2008

Stand Rock

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
35" w x 27" h
2008

Top Secret Area

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
35" w x 27" h
2008

Poseidon's Rage

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
27" w x 35" h
2008

Ambush Point

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
27" w x 35" h
2008

Memories from Witches Gultch

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
27" w x 35" h
2008

The Last Defense

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
27" w x 35" h
2008

Waiting for Battle

Silver Gelatin Print from Wet Plate Collodion Negative
35" w x 27" h
2008