

Bearing Witness

A Photographic Chronicle
of American Life,
1860-1945

Michael Lesy

With a preface by Warren I. Susman



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Preface

It is the advent of the Photograph . . . which divides the history of the world.

Roland Barthes, 1981

In no other form of society in history have there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual messages.

John Berger, 1972

There seems little doubt that our mental images of the past came from written descriptions for the first hundred years but from frozen pictorial descriptions for the second.

Charles A. Goodrum, 1974

American civilization grows more hieroglyphic every day. The cartoons of *Darling*, the advertisements in the back of magazines and on the billboards in streetcars, the acres of photographs in the Sunday papers, make us into a hieroglyphic civilization far nearer to Egypt than to England.

Vachel Lindsay, 1922

Historians have yet to confront fully the implications of America's becoming a "hieroglyphic" civilization. We have been living in a new world of visual images since the nineteenth century, with a range of consequences at least analogous to what occurred when civilization based on oral communication was transformed by the introduction of writing and, ultimately, printing. What is clear is the fundamental role of photography in our new world. Surely William M. Ivins, Jr., [*Prints and Visual Communication* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1953), p. 134] is correct when he proposes that photography provided a "means to ocular awareness of things that our eyes can never see directly." For him, photography was a "complete revolution in the way we use our eyes" and even more importantly "in the kind of things our minds permit our eyes to tell us." Such a revolution must certainly have had social and especially psychological consequences, but our cultural historians have scarcely begun to probe them.

This point is all the more significant because the advent of photog-

raphy and the creation of this new world of images coincide with and are clearly related to other major cultural changes. The world of the photograph, for example, is also the world of everyday life—the quotidian the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre analyzes with such brilliance in his *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. For not only is the concept of everyday life a product of the nineteenth century, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that the photograph, able to capture in exceptional detail the data of everyday life, made us aware of the role of the quotidian. The history of photography is the history of the revealing of the nature of everyday life; the history of the quotidian itself can exist only because the history of photography fundamentally documents it.

But the era of the photograph is also the era of our developing consumer culture. The consumption of images (as well as the more often-stressed images of consumption) is crucial to an understanding of that culture. For it is not hyperbole to suggest that photographs may

very well be considered among the first items of "mass consumption." The astounding growth in the sheer number of professional photographers (less than 1,000 by 1850 and more than 20,000 by 1890) and the development of large commercial firms in the business of selling images suggest a special and important role photography played in the new consumer culture. While documentary photography functioned in the service of government agencies (like the Department of the Interior) or the new corporations (like the railroads), the overwhelming number of images taken were purchased by a hungry new middle-class consumers' market. By 1860 the "family album" had become a commonplace in middle-class homes. Photographers supplied the pictures and the albums grew over the years. There, alongside the family Bible (which often contained the family genealogy), the album became an extension of the Bible: a family history. Members of the family—perhaps, especially, the children—studied this important history *through* the photographs. The album provided another kind of history, another vision of development and change over time.

Family life often centered on other kinds of images as well. For photography provided for the first time a vast number of diverse views of the world outside the home. "I think there is no parlor in America where there is not a stereoscope," commented one mid-nineteenth-century German authority on photography visiting the United States. Certainly, by the time of the Civil War, photographic studios offered and consumers eagerly purchased all kinds of pictures documenting that war, for example. It is worth quoting at some length part of an advertisement Alex Gardner (whose work as a photographer you can see in this book) placed in a newspaper in 1863:

Photographic Incidents of the War

The largest and finest collection of War Views ever made. Apart from the great interest appertaining to them, they stand unequalled as works of art. Amongst the contributors will be found the names of some of the most distinguished Photographers in the country.

The collection consists chiefly of views and scenes on the battlefields of the first and second Bull Run, Yorktown, Fair Oaks, Savage Station, Cedar Mountain, Hilton Head, Fort Pulaski, South Mountain, Harper's Ferry, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. Views of Warrenton, Culpeper, Fairfax, Beaufort, Aquia Creek, Falmouth, Sharsburg, Berlin, Ruins of Hampton, and various interesting localities.

Groups of General Officers and Staffs. Groups illustrating Camp Life. Portraits of General Officers on Horseback. A

large collection of distinguished personages, Military, Literary, and Scientific.

A corps of artists constantly in the field, who are adding to the collection daily.

Send for a catalog, corrected till 1st June 1863.

[Quoted in Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene* (New York: 1938), p. 231]

This is enough to suggest that the Civil War was the first great media event in American history. The vast photographic coverage of every aspect of the war was to fill, in 1911, ten volumes of *The Photographic History of the Civil War*. These images were purchased individually and in sets by thousands of American consumers during the war itself. Family life in the new consumer society therefore devolved around these images of the world as well as around private family images. The consequence of this fact has yet to be assessed.

Consumer culture finds its very base in the phenomenon of advertising. In the most literal sense, photographs—and many other of the new visuals—serve as advertisements. For the photographs do call attention to, give notice of, admonish and instruct, inform, give orders, or regulate, or even (in the most modern usage of the term) serve as paid announcements. This is no word game; rather, unless photographs are in fact examined as advertisements in the dictionary sense of the word, a major cultural function of these images will not be revealed.

Photographs are able to function as advertisements in our consumer culture because they also fulfill other needs so characteristic of American culture in the period since the middle of the nineteenth century. Emerson once suggested that Americans required both dreams and mathematics. Certainly that rings true, most especially, for the United States by the turn of the century. There was always the demand for the real, for Mr. Gradgrind's hard facts. Social survey, empirical data, statistics, fictional realism, science, solid flesh, a material universe, on the one hand; fairies and fairy tales, folklore, flights of fancy, extravaganzas, magic transformations, dreams and nightmares, spiritualism, and idealism, on the other. The complication culturally was not in the conflict between two orders but the insistence on both at the same time: dreams *and* mathematics, as Emerson suggested. So L. Frank Baum, the great inventor of the Land of Oz, argued for realistic fairy stories. This, in effect, symbolizes the consumer culture in its ideal form. And the photograph—the agency of science that recorded hard fact—was also the vehicle of magic transformations and the unseen world. Marianne Moore once defined a poem as an "imaginary garden with real roads in it." But that is precisely what a photograph is: Cut off in space from whatever unknown world surrounds it, frozen forever in time, the photograph is set in a never-never land, isolated and floating

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like any fairy tale, any dream; yet within that frame, arbitrary or fancy-free as it may be, there are those "real toads," the fundamental data, the hard facts. Thus, the photograph itself is defined by those very tensions that in most significant ways are the tensions of the culture itself. "The age demanded an image," the poet announced [in Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*]. And the images that the various ages of the era of consumer culture demanded were often most significantly to be found in photographs. In the very last paragraphs of his monumental study of some of man's fundamental myths in *The Golden Bough* (1890), Sir George Frazer offered the hope that "the dreams of magic may one day be the waking reality of science." That may be a key idea of the consumer culture and an important view of what many in that culture saw photography as achieving.

The coming of photography was thus a major event in history; perhaps an event of special import because it forced a change in our thinking about history itself. Early authorities on photography were certain this was the case: "Posterity, by the agency of photography, will view the faithful image of our times; the future students, in turning the pages of history, may at the same time look on the very skin, into the very eyes, of those long since mouldered to dust, whose lives and deeds he traces in the text." [Lake Price (1858) quoted in Taft, *Photography and the American Scene*, p. 137.] But a more recent student raises the issue of history and the photograph in a different and more sophisticated context. Granted, the photograph overcomes the resistance to believing in the past (with the photograph "the past is as certain as the present"). But this is not because the photograph succeeds simply as a representation of a previous reality. "The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. . . . The power of authentication exceeds the power of representation." [Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 88-89.]

Bearing Witness probes that special relationship between the past and photography, or, perhaps more significantly, between history and the photograph. Early in our own century scholars and critics began to examine these relationships, to analyze our culture in terms of its more popular cultural artifacts, to take seriously our photographic heritage. Notice has already been taken of the ten-volume *Photographic History of the Civil War* published in 1911. It was also in this period that the Library of Congress itself began to develop seriously and systematically its great collections of photographs. And it was in these early decades of the century as well that more and more serious effort turned to the analysis of images and their significance. For example, a new poetics announced the centrality of "the image": ". . . that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." In the same essay ("A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry*, March 1913), Ezra Pound insisted on "direct treatment of

the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective," and warned against "abstractions." Although Pound claimed music as his guide, much of this sounds as if it were derived from the new world of visual images and especially the photograph. But as late as 1940 students of documentary photography were still trying to find the way toward full historical use of these "documents" and still seeking the subtler relationships between photography and history. In their article in the American Historical Association volume *The Cultural Approach to History*, Roy Stryker and Paul H. Johnstone reviewed the major photographic sources and urged historians to participate in their use. But what they largely found in the photographs were "physical details of material culture," "clues to social organization and institutional relationships," and, finally, a rather vague suggestion that such photographs "can interpret the human and particularly the inarticulate elements."

The serious work of the last quarter century in photography and cultural history has brought us to a point where we can really begin to understand the relationship between photography and history. Arranging photographs carefully as products of a culture and therefore related to one another, the analyst can explore more firmly the psychological underpinnings and the social and cultural relationships now revealed. The very form (the photograph) helps not only as a representation of simple material facts and documented events but also as a reflection of the culture from which it comes, an authentication of its tensions, its confusions, its paradoxes, its psychological as well as social victories and defeats, its vision of itself, its self-consciousness. History has always been the story of the development of self-awareness over time; in our era the photograph has become, for all the reasons suggested above, a major instrument for recording that growing self-consciousness.

A few examples of a reading of this vision in Michael Lesy's collection are in order. Note that Lesy allows no traditional heroism in any of his Civil War photographs. There is a special haunted sense in almost every frame. This is a war of profound moral difficulties; the victors fail to look victorious. Alex Gardner's "General Caldwell and staff on the battlefield of Antietam," (1-11) can speak for others in the group. Here the traditional staff grouping does not result in a traditional view. Virtually every face appears mad, driven insane, haunted by horror. The flag is most casually draped; there is little that speaks of God or country. The Black in the background appears almost as an accusing ghost. But the extraordinary nature of this image—an image that is virtually a self-conscious condemnation of the very war it seems to celebrate—is even more apparent when compared to a contemporary parallel photograph such as one of Roger Fenton's Crimean War photographs (the Library of Congress also has a major collection of these photographs). Fenton's officers and staff pose romantically and heroically. They gesture with dramatic effect. The uniforms, the flags, the tents are neat and orderly; the backgrounds free

of any disorder or any threatening ghosts. It is too simple to argue that Fenton is an "unrealistic" photographer. Is he not in fact creating the image they want at home in England? But what of Gardner, that seller of images? Who would want his mad vision and why? Does that not tell us something profoundly true about the moral and psychological ambivalence of Americans about their Civil War?

Or the images in *Black Life*: How can "Romeo and Juliet" (p. 23) and Frances Benjamin Johnston's seated woman (p. 24) both be said to be "representative" of Black life? Of course, they represent, rather, two vastly different perceptions, perceptions that can and do dwell side by side in the same American universe. History informs us that Alfred Campbell's image ("Romeo and Juliet") is the more typical as well as stereotypical, the image perhaps most Americans wished to believe. But at the same time Johnston's images not only inform us of history's too often forgotten alternative visions but alert us in the present to the possibilities of our own options.

And Lewis Hine's incredible children? Each precious and sentimental child reveals both the "real" (that is, surface image) and the "ideal" (the angel hidden inside). Hine sees no evil in his "sitters." The photographs actually show us perhaps not what was but always exactly what Hine sees. His remains a vision of pre-Freudian innocence, no matter how the dirt and toil discolored skin and bone. The question is not whether or not these images represent what is real but rather what in fact the basic reality is. For Hine and many "progressives" as well, remove the dirt and toil and the basic and real goodness does shine through.

And what of the strange intruder who interrupts the carefully posed and rather pompous Signal Corps group (p. 67)? What reason or right permits the native Filipino to pop his head in the window and spoil the shot? Or does that incredible juxtaposition somehow reveal the reality of the imperial situation? And what of Frances Benjamin Johnston's Marine officer (p. 71)? Does it really give you historical information? What data does it offer? What facts about America? There, with all the neat and patient composition, the beauty of the flowers in the foreground; the elegance of the perfectly draped flag; the precision of the tent; the care of the framing; the tall, immaculately dressed and handsome officer—and yet somehow deep within the picture itself some awful mystery, some hidden horror? There is a seemingly enormous black spot, a hole of darkness without end at the very center of the picture. How many dark spots are there at the very heart of these American pictures Lesy presents? What does that tell us about America as the century turned? This seems especially the case when this picture is placed beside the several sentimental stereotypes or any of the other "soft-porn" stereotypes on pp. 72 and 73. The arrangement of images, the forced comparison that photographs not only make possible, because of the overwhelming abundance of images (a charac-

teristic of an age of abundance, a consumer culture), but insist upon. Images tumble one upon the other; a kind of montage occurs in which the conflict among images suddenly reveals a cultural conflict behind all the images and more serious than any single image can portray.

Or the "Farm woman feeding her pullets" (p. 99) who wears one of her Sunday dresses to undertake a chore she would probably never do in that particular dress. Undoubtedly, she does it because she was being photographed and was clearly delighted with that fact. So we immediately are reminded that the fact of photographing means not only a conscious perspective on the part of the photographer but also one on the part of his subject—a kind of double Heisenberg effect. Yet, while that fact casts doubt on some historical accuracy (that dress for feeding pullets), it tells us at the same time another important fact: A farm woman in 1927 has a special sense of pride and wants to be seen in her best dress—a psychological and sociological truth of some importance. And how much we learn from a comparison of dress between family members. "Farmer and his family" (p. 104) appears a simple enough family group, but a careful examination of differences in clothing styles (especially in the generations of women) appears to reveal other significant differences as well, both psychological and moral.

Many of the photographs illustrating the Depression end up even more impressively demonstrating ideological difficulties in coping with the victims of the Depression. For years, I have experimented with Farm Security Administration photographs in classes. If the class knows nothing about the New Deal and the aims and purposes of the FSA, and if the photographs are presented without their captions, I can usually anticipate one response; when the captions are revealed, the response almost always changes. For many of these photographers found themselves both attracted to their subjects and yet anxious to dramatize their plight. They sought to make them victims and heroes at the same time. The captions often say what the photograph itself cannot reveal. Rothstein's Missouri "Evicted sharecropper and his child" (p. 113) certainly shows a concerned father and his child. But there is a strength, a beauty, a determination in the father's face, a sense of protectiveness toward the child that gives no clue to his troubles. He is heroic rather than beaten. Both of Dorothea Lange's pictures (pp. 108 and 109) are captioned "An aged cotton farmer who inherited his lands, which are heavily mortgaged now." This caption gives us information unavailable in the photographs themselves; yet, do the pictures in fact tell us the same thing? Once again, the point is not that the photographs do not give a true or a real picture. Rather, many of these pictures reveal other psychological "facts" or other "sociological" truths. Any study, for example, of the FSA photographs reveals a good deal about 1930s ideology and ideals, about 1930s visions and world view. Russell Lee shows us a "Migrant family saying grace

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before their noon-day meal by the side of the road" (p. 111). His caption tell us so. And every word of the caption is important. This is not simply a family picnic (although it certainly might have been). That very contrast is important: It tells us how the official New Deal wanted others to see and feel the world. These are significant advertisements as are all great pictures created for the consumption of Americans. Overall, the whole series of photographs suggests an astounding juxtaposition of images of abundance, achievement, and wealth, which one expects to discover in a consumer culture, with images of death, decay, disruption. Are these, too, characteristics of a consumer culture?

One last comment on these particular images Lesy has selected and arranged. His own vision of America's vision has led him to stress images of the wounded, the despairing, the damaged, and the confused. Many of these images are painful; some even horrible. Terror haunts this work as it haunted those Civil War participants, especially the terror of war and the organization of war. Often, Lesy appears a kind of Goya showing us ironically not his own visions of war but *our* own (those we consume regularly throughout our history). There is special warrant for these images in our tradition. As far back as 1756 Edmund Burke, staunch and conservative rationalist that he was, wrote *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. His vision of the sublime—a key idea in modern capitalist culture—is an important one to consider when viewing the images to which I have referred.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

This is important to Burke because he wants all to seek their own self-preservation. He is convinced that the sublime, because of the strength of that emotion, will, through terror, produce that desired end. And so, too, Michael Lesy. He has given us a moral tale in his history. He has warned us against ourselves, using our own images, those images our age demanded, arranging them to form a new critical vision. From the images he has selected he has in fact constructed a History, always probing the relationship between our history and the images themselves. In the process, he has not only provided us with a vision of our past but forced us to clarify the issue of our own relationship to the images that have made our past. Thus, he has not only tried to illuminate the past that historians study but also tried to change our past that keeps unfolding through the present and into the future. Lesy is thus in a great tradition. He believes that a critical awareness of History can alter history itself. He has ordered our way through the new world of images, helping make sense of our "hieroglyphic" civilization in the hope that our new self-awareness can make us demand far different images and therefore live far different lives.

Warren I. Susman