

L. A. Huffman: Photographer of the American West

Larry Len Peterson

First edition (hardcover): Settlers West Gallery, Tucson, AZ,
2003 (out of print)

Second edition (softcover): Mountain Press, Missoula, MT,
2005

More than 500 images, 308 pages. \$45 (softcover edition)

Reviewed by Mark Browning

If this book is someone's first exposure to the labors of Laton Alton "L. A." Huffman, it'll be a sweet surprise to experience the fifty-plus years of his career that he dedicated to capturing his new-found love: the cowboy west of southeastern Montana upon its birth. This book was first created in 2003 as a low-number, pre-sold edition hardcover (with a few special leather-bound copies) that quickly became collectible before the softcover was printed to satisfy demand.

On the heels of the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn, Fort Keogh, Montana Territory, was established and the nearby town of Miles sprang up shortly after that. The lure of legends and exploration was too much for the young midwestern photographer Laton Alton Huffman to ignore. He arrived to assume the "post photographer" position at the fort late in 1879. He wasn't the first hire there, but unlike the others, he came and stayed. He witnessed, captured, and collected the transition from native-controlled buffalo ground to open range for sheep and cattle, and later fenced

ranches and farms.

Huffman realized this was a changing era unfolding before his eyes and, more importantly, his lens. The excitement was doubled because of the ever-changing methods being experimented with in the relatively new photographic process. Of course, neither full-color film nor paper was available yet so hand coloring, when desired, was carefully applied. He had a professional relationship with several other notable and little-known photographers, and some of these people's efforts pop up in the "Huffman Collection." His own work was widely published or borrowed in that period, sometimes without credit that today is done as standard courtesy if not by requirement. It appears that little importance was given to the captor of the negative compared to whoever produced the tangible, viewable image positive, especially if it was altered to a new, unique image.

This is the first biographical and pictorial history of this figure in half a century. Oddly enough, it's also the first book on this subject using digital imaging, the latest major development in photo technology. Two 1950s books by Mark H. Brown and W. R. Felton, *The Frontier Years* and *Before Barbed Wire*, provided the basis for some of what is related in the new book. Having the images replicate the vintage prints (many hand tinted) from which they were copied—rather than using new prints off the old negatives—adds to the historical flavor of the book. This collection also reduces the amount of yarn spinning that Huffman developed to help sell his product. It's a large volume with over five hundred images, many not published previously. You'll see only part of Gene and Bev Allen's large private collection that also provided written reference material.

But where those early books retold the same story Huffman presented of this romantic western adventure, this new one also mirrors the daily life of his subjects. Yes, the reckless, horseback cowboy, the manly hunters, and bare-chested “noble savage” are still front and center, but you will see something fresh and new, such as a farmer on a horse-drawn potato-digging contraption while hand-pickers fill gunny sacks with this new crop. A somber yet defiant mood is often evident in the portraits of the displaced native residents. Typical of this genre, these individuals were often carefully posed and costumed for their sitting, and the indignation thrust on some is clear. *L. A. Huffman: Photographer of the American West* is primarily a wonderful picture book that reflects what

Huffman was most interested in and includes enough stories to give the viewer a good point of reference.

This is still not the definitive biography of Huffman that is deserved or, even better, the history of these intertwined early photographers of the “This Last West” area of southeastern Montana. That history is yet to be thoroughly researched or gathered. *L. A. Huffman: Photographer of the American West* does parallel or presuppose another book that I would recommend, *Photographing Montana* (Knopf, 1990; Mountain Press, 2001), about the career of Huffman’s contemporary and sometime associate, Evelyn Cameron (see also www.evelyncameron.com/).