Article Title: The Long View: Reading a Photograph

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Article Summary: Four historians and a photographer “read” two photographs—a panoramic from Garden County taken in 1917 and a modern-day equivalent.

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Photographs / Images: Garden County Fair, 1917 (photo attributed to C O Dedmore, North Platte); Burwell Rodeo, 2006 (photo by Joel Sartore)
The Long View Reading a Photograph

The camera is front of the school at the northwest corner at 24th Street and Creston, just south of the North Platte River, in Lewellen, Nebraska. The photograph was taken by C. O. Dedmore in 1917. It is a panoramic view of the 1917 county fair, which was held in Lewellen, Nebraska. The fair was attended by a large crowd, and the fairgrounds were filled with various attractions and events.

The photograph shows the fair's main attractions, including a large tent on the left side of the image, a Ferris wheel in the center, and a parade of horse-drawn wagons on the right. The fairgrounds were bustling with people, and the sky was filled with balloons and other airships. The fair was a time of fun and excitement, and the photograph captures the spirit of the event.

The photograph is a window into a bygone era, and it serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving our history. It is a valuable resource for historians and researchers who are interested in the history of the American West.

The photograph is available for viewing and downloading at the National Geographic website.
The Burwell Panoramic

How long did the moment last? All eyes are on the camera—even those in the audience. They must have realized they were part of history that day.

The photo is in black and white. Translation: Everyone in it must be dead by now.

So often we must guess at what was going on back then, looking past the soft focus, grainy emulsion and costume clothing. It was so long ago. It just doesn’t seem real anymore.

A case in point is this photo. It’s a panoramic image, surely a rodeo, with cowboys mostly, lined up just so. Some are smiling. All are paying attention.

What would you ask any of them about the moment this was taken? Did everyone in town show up? Was it hot out? Was it the first time you had ever been in a panoramic photograph? Most important, was it really big deal?

On this day, in this photograph, the answer to all of the above is yes. I should know. I took it.

In 2006.

Panoramics just aren’t done anymore. They take time and effort, something we’re short on these days. Besides, photography is hardly new and certainly not special anymore. We have cameras everywhere now, from the one in your cell phone to the hundreds hiding in ceilings at every casino and Wal-Mart, watching your every move.

It all started when, my friend, Dale Seidel, called and asked if I could do a panoramic “pitcher” at the next rodeo a few months down the road. I then forgot about it until the day came on the last weekend of July, 2006.

In his black hat, moustache and western shirt with buttons about to pop off around the waist, Dale came to me during the calf roping event and said, “You just tell me when you want the picture started and we’ll get ya lined up.” That made me nervous. I realized that history was riding on this.

I took a guess and told Dale we should shoot the photo about twenty minutes before sundown. The arena has a break on the west side, allowing the last light of day to stream right in. The chosen time came, and rodeo announcer Hadley Barrett stopped the show. A stepladder was dragged out to the west side of the arena. I motioned for all of the performers to come right on up. They hesitated at first, but eventually came around close, in a circle. I was using a wide lens, so the closer the better.

And what I saw was amazing.

This was the first time in my twenty-five-year career that a group this big actually paid attention to me. But this was the 85th anniversary photo, after all, so their attitudes bordered on reverence.

I worked fast, but at a measured pace so I wouldn’t screw up. At the top of the ladder I turned slowly in a complete circle, shooting a single vertical frame every few degrees, using a Nikon D2X digital camera. I did this twice. Everything would eventually be digitally stitched together into a panorama using Photoshop.

The entire shoot lasted less than three minutes. I worked hard, but almost mechanically now. I wanted to keep my eyes open longer. When the last light of day was but a memory, Hadley called out, “Looks like we’ve got a keeper folks!” and the crowd applauded and cheered. In just a couple minutes it was business as usual, meaning it was time for the chuckwagon races.

The people in Burwell have always thought about their place in time. Of course they still farm and ranch along the Loup River, but we all know that’s its images that make this place special. The theater and the motel are named for it, the rodeo grounds long ago listed as a National Historic Site. The town boasts all year for that last weekend in July.

If you go this year, be sure to look for the North Side Bar. It’s that white, framed building on the town square, the one with the bronc rider painted on it. Go in and order a glass of cold beer. There, on the west wall, put the cowboys and the tourists and the farmers just in from cutting hay, in their museum: panoramic photos, framed and yellowed by smoke and sunlight, each taken at a milestone in the rodeo’s march through the years. They put a new one up last year, sized just right to match the rest.

If you’ve got some time, just ask. They’ll tell you all about it.

JOEL SARTORE