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Article Summary: The article provides previously unknown biographical information about Anderson, the nineteenth-century photographer of Fort Niobrara and the Rosebud Reservation. The Society acquired three hundred fifty original Anderson photograph negatives in 1970.

Cataloging Information:

Names: John Alvin Anderson, Charles P Jordan

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Photographs / Images: Officers' Row at Fort Niobrara, January 13, 1888; Fort Niobrara, January 13, 1888; Fort Niobrara, 1886; oxen crossing the Niobrara River with wood at Fort Niobrara c. 1886, showing extra yoke of oxen added for the crossing; close-up view of the wood haulers with the normal number of oxen; Sioux Indians and Commissioners holding council at Rosebud Agency, May 4, 1889; Cheyenne camp at the old Red Cloud Agency site, Fort Robinson; Cheyenne camp drying meat at the old Red Cloud Agency site c 1886; Sioux Indian Council at Rosebud, 1892; Sioux Chief Two Strike; interior of the C P Jordan Store, Rosebud; Sioux Chief Crow Dog; beef issue near Rosebud Creek; Sioux Indian celebration, Rosebud

JOHN ALVIN ANDERSON, FRONTIER PHOTOGRAPHER

The Fort Niobrara and Rosebud Reservation photographs of John Alvin Anderson have long been known to the public, though very little has been known about the photographer himself. Born in Sweden on March 25, 1869, he was brought to this country as a small child by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. A. S. Anderson. His father was a carpenter, and it has been variously reported that the family lived in New York and Pennsylvania prior to coming to Nebraska in 1884.

The Anderson family enumeration in the 1885 census for Seven Creeks Precinct, Cherry County (pg. 8), gives possible clues to the various homes of the family prior to their coming to this state:

Anderson, A. S., 56, widowed, carpenter, born Sweden
———, Emma 26, daughter, born Sweden
———, Chas., 21, son, farmer, born Sweden
———, John, 16, son, born Sweden
———, Jennie, 12, daughter, born Pennsylvania
———, Clody, 9, son, born New York

On a nearby farm, found on the same census page, was enumerated the family of Maggie, a married Anderson daughter:

Carlson, G[us] ., 37, farmer, born Sweden
———, Aminda, 22, wife, born Sweden
———, Alma, 7, born Pennsylvania
———, Emma, 3, daughter, born Pennsylvania

It has been recorded that Mrs. A. S. Anderson, the photographer's mother, died in Pennsylvania in 1879 and that he was raised by his sister Maggie Carlson. If the census ages can be trusted, it would appear the Anderson family came to the United States between 1869 and 1873, where the daughter Jennie was born in Pennsylvania. By 1876, when the son Clody was born, the family had removed to New York, where they apparently lived only a short time, if they were back in Pennsylvania when the mother died in 1879. This is followed through by the listing of the eldest Carlson child being born in Pennsylvania about 1878.

Based on several assumptions, this seems a reasonable picture of the photographer's childhood prior to the family's arrival in Seven Creeks Precinct, Cherry County, Nebraska in 1884.

After only a short stay young John was sent back to Pennsylvania to be educated, and apparently it was during this time he learned something of the primitive art of photography. At least, by 1887 he was working as a civilian photographer for the army at Fort Niobrara near Valentine. As far as is known, his photographs of the great snow drifts at the fort after the blizzard of 1888 are the only photographic record of that Nebraska disaster.

About 1889 he returned to Pennsylvania for a short time, but by the early 1890's he had returned to the frontier, this time working as a clerk in the Rosebud Reservation trading post of Colonel Charles P. Jordan. It is said that Anderson at one time owned a partnership in the post. During this time he obviously spent a great deal of time photographing the Brule Sioux at their agency, doing formal portrait photographs as well as noted shots. His "beef issue" views on the reservation have long been noted.

After several years of ranching, Anderson operated the Sioux Indian Museum at Rapid City, South Dakota, where his photographs and famous collection of Indian artifacts were on exhibition. The latter was sold to the U. S. Department of Interior in 1938, though his photographs were in his possession when he died on June 26, 1948, at Atascadero, California.

In the Spring of 1970 a letter was received at the Society from Idaho offering some 350 original Anderson photograph negatives for sale. Prior to this date it was generally believed that most of the plates had been destroyed in a 1928 fire at the Anderson home. In June of this year the collection was purchased by the Society Foundation. Certain of the photographs in the collection were known from photographs already in the Society collections and from other prints left by Anderson. Others, however, prior to this time could not be identified as Anderson's work. The views which follow are samples from the collection of this frontier photographer.



Officers' Row at Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, January 13, 1888, a day after the Blizzard of January 12, 1888.



Fort Niobrara, January 13, 1888.



Fort Niobrara, 1886.



Oxen crossing the Niobrara River with wood at Fort Niobrara about 1886. Extra yoke of oxen have been added for the crossing.



Close-up view of the wood haulers with the normal number of yoke of oxen.



No. 3 - Indians and Commissioners holding council at
Rosebud Agency, May 4, 1889.

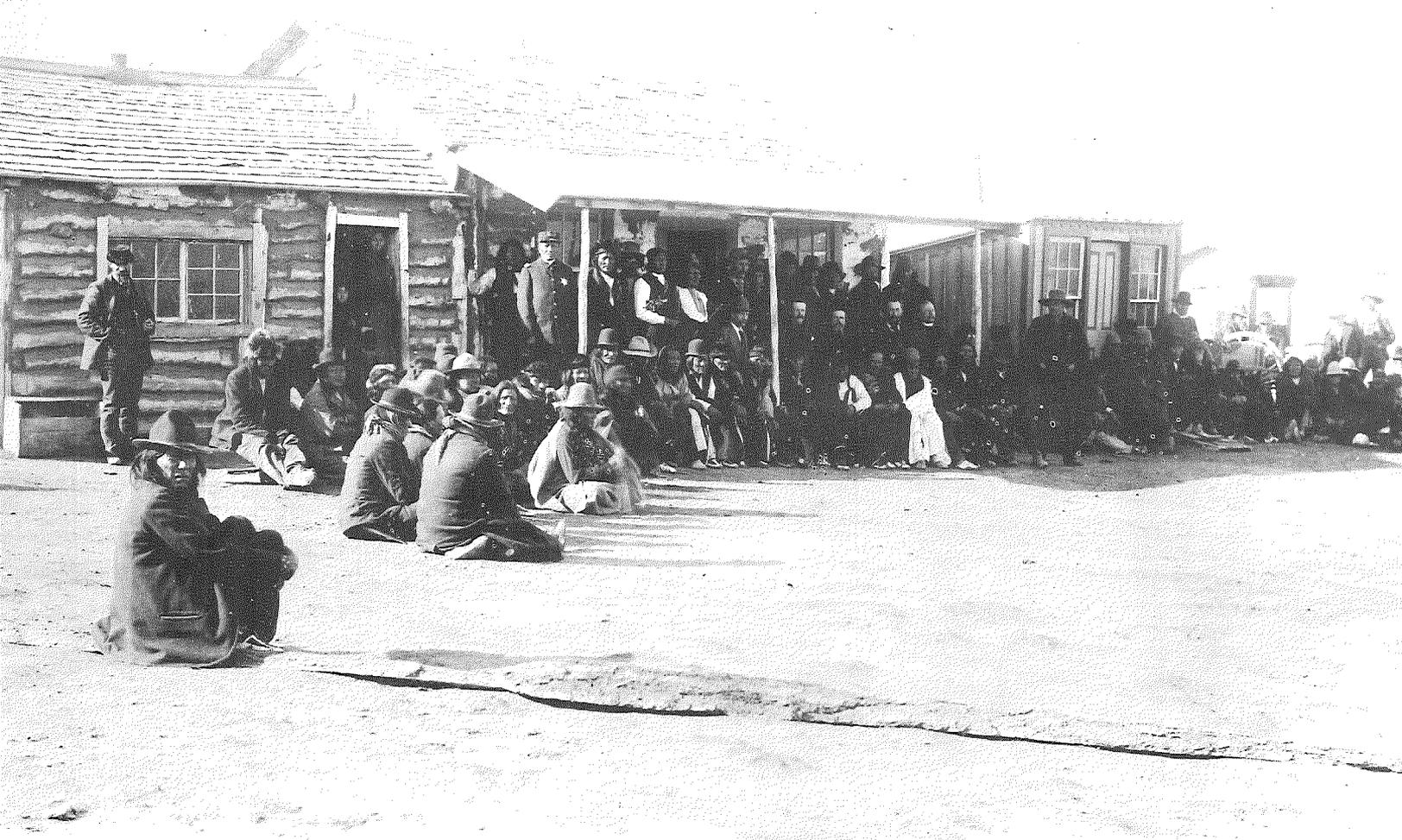
Sioux Indians and Commissioners holding council at Rosebud Agency, May 4, 1889.



Cheyenne camp at the old Red Cloud Agency site, Fort Robinson. Note the travois poles with carrier often used for children.



Cheyenne camp drying meat on the old Red Cloud Agency site at Fort Robinson, circa 1886.



Sioux Indian Council at Rosebud, 1892.



John A. Anderson made portraits of many Sioux leaders, including this view of Chief Two Strike.



Interior of the Colonel C. P. Jordan Store, Rosebud.



© Snow Dog

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By J. M. W. P. S. W.

Crow Dog, Sioux Chief (Copyright, 1900).



Beef issue near Rosebud Creek.



Sioux Indian celebration, Rosebud.