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Missourians Of 1850 "Watched The Birdie" And Squirmed—!

By the State Historical Society of Missouri at Columbia
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The family filed soberly into the studio smelling strongly of clean soap and hair oil. Mustaches and sideburns were curled to perfection, cowlicks were plastered down with thick oil, and faces shone red and healthy from hard scrubbing. The little man with the green smock and black beret, Professor Zafu, arranged the ladies on straight-back chairs with iron head rests. He put their heads in the correct position and cautioned them not to move. The men stood behind, self-conscious in their Sunday suits and a little suspicious of the proceedings. The children sat on the floor in front, awed by the impressive camera and, quieted by the threat of things to come if they weren't. The professor squinted at the group from all directions, then disappeared behind the black drape. A minute later stilted expressions and stiff-necked figures were preserved for posterity by man's newest invention, the daguerreotype.

Within ten years after the first daguerreotypes were introduced in the United States they became the rage of the country and Missourians joined the throng of people who "wanted to have their picture made." By 1847 the St. Louis gallery of J. H. Fitzgibbon had won a country-wide reputation and St. Louis became the camera center of the west.

The smaller towns which had no "resident artist" were visited periodically by wandering daguerreotypists fitted up with horse-drawn vans. Many of the credulous villagers associated the daguerreotypists with "magicians, an impression left uncorrected by the amateur artists and helped along by

their use of the darkened closet. Like magicians they acquired the title of professor, a nomenclature which has always covered a multitude of sins, mostly omissions.

The art flourished in Missouri and newspapers were filled with advertisements of itinerant artists who "were only going to be in the city a few weeks," and advertised boldly that they could take pictures on sunny or cloudy days. The daguerreotypist usually occupied a second story room where the light was good (and the rent cheap) and had a gallery of his work attached to his studio. Later many of the studios became very elegant and many a Missourian posed rigidly beside a column and Grecian urn with the Roman Coliseum in the background. The standard daguerreotype allowed no deviation. In the Kansas City Enterprise of September 20, 1856, D. H. Hall, self-named "Daguerrian artist," advised prospective customers to "always dress in dark clothes, avoiding pink or white."

The early daguerreotypes, before the discovery of the use of chloride of gold which produced darker tones in the developing process, were at best temporal things. Unless kept out of reach they blurred and rubbed off, and after a length of time faded out. The accuracy of the camera caused many a daguerreotypist to squirm when he heard his subject complain, "But I can't look like that!"

Having the portrait made was an ordeal. Many a young boy has squirmed in his Sunday suit and ruffled shirt with his head stuck uncomfortably in an iron prong-like affair designed to hold the "patient's" head still. The headrest, hated by all and the cause of still figures and pained expres-

sions, was the daguerreotypist's blessing in disguise. Let a picture turn out poorly and he could always say, "You moved," or "You breathed too deeply."

During the gold rush period the business enjoyed immense prosperity, and the added business caused the price of a small daguerreotype to go down as low as \$2.50 as the forty-niners flocked to get their picture taken to leave with their loved ones.

With the very earliest equipment the artist could only produce one picture of each pose so the daguerreotype became treasured family property. But lo, with the passage of years and the arrival of the third and fourth generation, the family portrait became a source of merriment, and young Susie is liable to look at great-grandfather, erect and dignified and scream with delight . . . "wasn't he a card!"