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FORUM



Muybridge in Alaska / Legacy of NN Cannery / Forum Leadership Programs / Alaska Native Doll Traditions

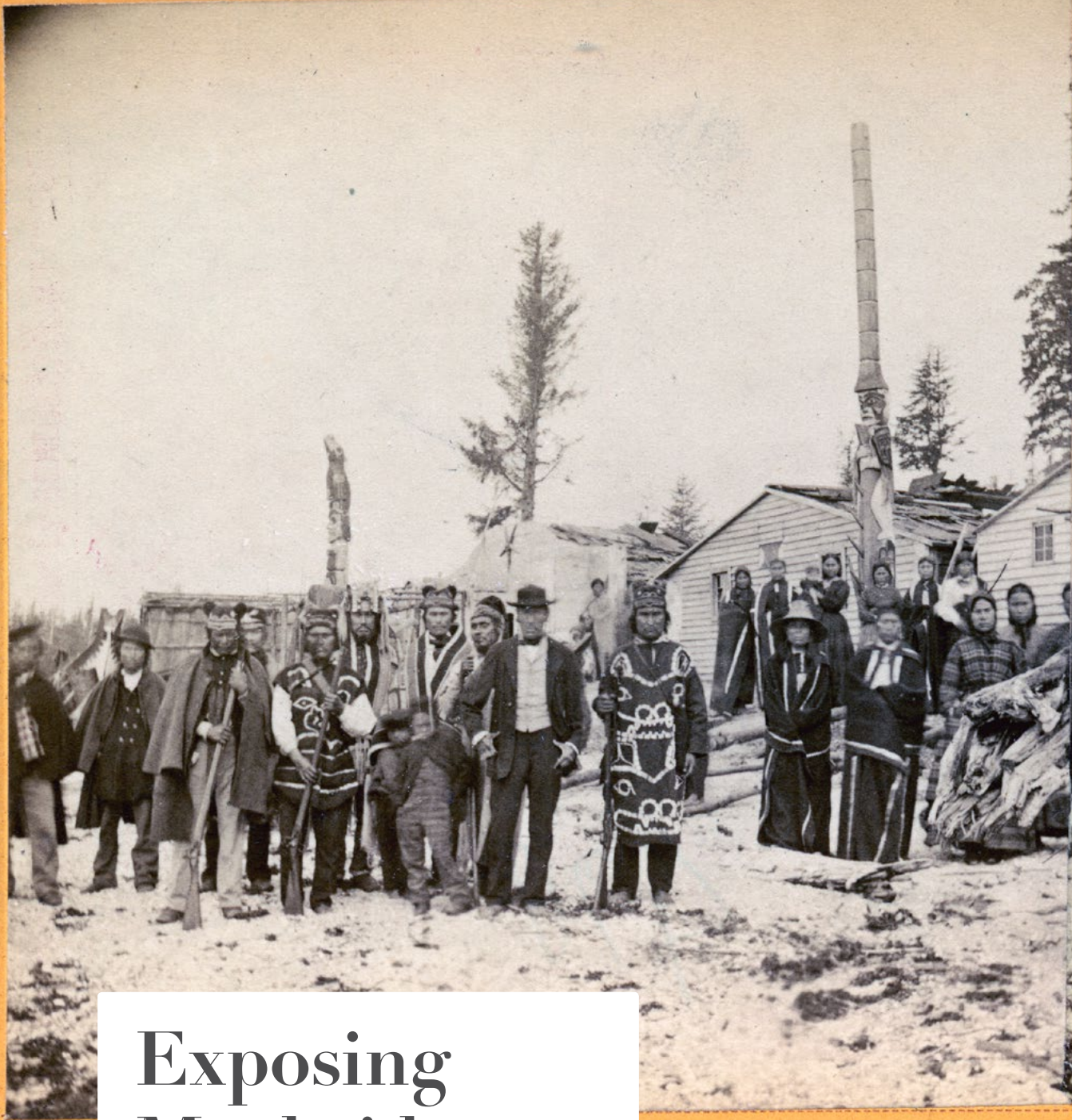
FORUM



In 1868, the photographer Eadweard Muybridge—best known for his later studies of animal and human locomotion—came to Alaska and made some of the first photographs of the new U.S. territory. The doubled images were stereographs, intended to simulate depth when seen through a stereoviewer. Above is “Sitka, Russo Greek Church.” See page 28. 84.XC.902.6, THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES

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COVER: Alice Qannik Glenn wades into the surf in her hometown of Utgiagvik. Photo by her sister, Joanne Mitchak Glenn. See page 12



Exposing Muybridge

THE PHOTOGRAPH ARRIVED at my office in an overnight mail envelope from Canada. The two-by-three-inch *carte de visite* was in a plastic sleeve, sandwiched between two hand-cut pieces of cardboard held together with Scotch tape, inside a paper envelope. The photograph showed a group of Tlingit, an Alaska Native tribe, posing before a totem pole. Faded, worn around the edges, with a prominent crease running horizontally across its center, it wasn't much to

GRANT REPORT

The innovative photographer's images of Alaska come to attention after 150 years

By Marc Shaffer



Illustrated by MUYBRIDGE,

ALASKA.

Published by BRADLEY & RULOFSON.

490—Group of Indians.

Eadweard Muybridge No. 490, "Group of Indians." The images depict a Tlingit group on Tongass Island in August 1868. The left photo of this view was used as Muybridge's *carte de visite*. Paired images such as this, when viewed through special apparatus, can create an illusion of depth. Known as stereographs, they were popular in the early decades of photography. A similar principle underlies 3D movies.

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look at. What made this photograph special, though, was not the picture on the front, but what was on the back: an inscription by the man who made it 150 years ago: Helios, a.k.a. Eadweard Muybridge.

A HORSE IN MOTION

That Muybridge made photographs in Alaska is a barely mentioned footnote to his legendary career.

What Muybridge is best known for, of course, is motion. On behalf of the California railroad baron, politician, and horse breeder Leland Stanford, Muybridge managed to do what no other photographer had yet been able to—capture something moving faster than the eye can see.

In 1872, Stanford approached Muybridge to settle a debate over whether at a full gait a horse's four hooves ever left the ground at once. Nobody knew for sure, because at that speed a horse's legs become a blur to the naked eye.

There was only one problem. In the early 1870s, cameras were sluggish machines, slower in fact than the human eye. "[S]uch a thing had never been heard of," Muybridge told Stanford, "photography had not yet arrived at any such wonderful perfection as would enable it to depict a trotting horse at speed."¹

Nonetheless, at Stanford's insistence, Muybridge agreed to try, and after several failed attempts, finally succeeded. "[T]he pictures were little better than silhouettes, and it was difficult to distinguish, except by inference, the right feet from the left," Muybridge later recalled.² Though of poor quality, the photograph provided Stanford with the proof he needed: All four hooves could be seen to be elevated from the ground.

In 1877, Muybridge and Stanford reunited to produce the first sequences of horses in rapid motion, using an electric shutter system devised with Stanford's railroad engineers that snapped photographs at an astonishing 1/2000 of a second.

Muybridge's first equine motion sequence revealed that horses move very differently than the human eye perceives, provoking a storm of criticism. "Scientists ridiculed it, anatomists scoffed at it, and old turfmen jeered at it and aggressively maintained the impossibility of a horse ever getting itself into the position represented."³

Partly to persuade skeptics, during public lectures Muybridge would project single images of a horse in unfamiliar positions and then animate the sequence during which the horse's movement appeared normal. These early "moving picture shows" would become instrumental to the later development of cinema. "Nothing was wanting but the clatter of hoofs upon the turf and an occasional breath of steam from the nostrils, to make the spectator believe that he had before him genuine flesh-and-blood steeds," observed one reporter.⁴

CAPTURING THE WEST

Muybridge's motion work has largely overshadowed the first chapter of his career, during which he produced one of the most important catalogues of the

early American West, images ranging from Alaska to Central America, the Pacific Coast to Utah.

If Muybridge's motion work reflected his technological age, his landscape work documents a time of dramatic social change—a wild Yosemite opening to tourism, the newly globalizing coffee industry in Guatemala, a fast developing San Francisco, an Indian War on the California-Oregon border.

I first came to know of Eadweard Muybridge while directing a PBS documentary, *American Jerusalem: Jews and the Making of San Francisco*. In search of pictures of early San Francisco, I was invariably drawn to those by Muybridge. They were seductive, absorbing, magnetic.

The closer I looked, the
more I could see the
mischievous Muybridge
hiding in the shadows of
our modern culture.

Intrigued, I began researching Muybridge, and quickly learned he was one of the most important photographers to ever live—the subject of books, museum exhibitions, even an opera. He has been a major influence on leading 20th-century figures in art and science such as Walt Disney, George Lucas, Francis Bacon, and the Nobel chemist Ahmed Zewail, among many others. The closer I looked, the more I could see the mischievous Muybridge hiding in the shadows of our modern culture—popping up in music videos, a hit cartoon, or an old Department of Defense propaganda film; serving as an inspiration for path-breaking motion picture special effects; his name gracing a career achievement award in biomechanics. I even found Muybridge's horses galloping inside living cells, part of a breakthrough science experiment conducted at Harvard.

Muybridge's personal life was as dramatic as his professional one was distinguished: he suffered a near fatal head injury after being thrown from a stagecoach; he killed his wife's lover, and was acquitted by an all-male jury; he was nearly destroyed in an ugly falling out with his patron Leland Stanford.

In 2013, I began developing *Exposing Muybridge* (muybridgethemovie.com), the first feature documentary on the life and legacy of the photographer.

MUYBRIDGE IN ALASKA: 1868

In the summer of 2017, I decided to organize an exhibition of original Muybridge photographs of Alaska to coincide with the 150th anniversary of their making in 1868.

One of my first calls was to Leonard Walle, a major Muybridge collector. Len generously agreed to lend sixteen stereo views of Alaska to the exhibition.



Eadweard Muybridge No. 480, "Fort Wrangle, from Rock Cod," 1868.
Published by BRADLEY & RULOFSON. J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM 84.XC.902.2

As for the *carte de visite* inscribed by Muybridge, I had first stumbled across it mentioned in a book of essays on the Tlingit people. I tracked it down to Mary Everson, a Tlingit woman whose ancestors had migrated to Vancouver Island from Alaska in the late 1800s. Everson happily agreed to share the photograph for the show.

Mary inherited the photograph from her mother, Margaret Frank, the great-granddaughter of Chief Andáa, believed to be the main figure wearing the frontlet in the image at right, taken on Tongass Island.

As a young woman, Frank had starred in the 1914 silent film *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, directed by the photographer Edward S. Curtis. In the mid-1970s, a writer named Peggy Walker, herself a former silent film actress, wrote an article about Frank and the Curtis film for the Screen Actors Guild. Somehow, Walker had the Muybridge photograph and gave it to Frank.

For many Tlingit, especially those related to figures in the photographs, Muybridge's stereos are a cherished connection to the past. "When I see this picture, I see the woven tunics and I know which clans the people were from," Everson says. "It's history in a photo."

"[Muybridge] gave us *at.wóo*, a precious thing," echoes Richard Jackson, leader of the Tantakwaan Teikweidí clan pictured in the Tongass Island photographs. "This [photograph] is something that belongs to me and my soul."

Muybridge in Alaska: 1868 premiered in January at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage.

JOURNEY TO ALASKA

On July 29, 1868, Muybridge departed for Alaska aboard the steamship *Pacific* as part of an expedition led by Major-General Henry W. Halleck, commander of the U.S. Military Division of the Pacific.

On August 13, the *Pacific* crossed into Alaska, docking at Tongass Island, where the U.S. was constructing a fort. It continued north to Wrangle (now Wrangell), site of another new military base, before reaching Sitka, the U.S. capital, on August 18. The expedition spent a total of two weeks in Alaska.

Working in the wet-plate collodion process of his day, Muybridge recorded his images onto glass plates, which he bathed in a chemical solution just prior to exposure. He would develop the photographs immediately in the field, using a horse-drawn carriage he dubbed the Flying Studio as his darkroom.

"Helios Rampant," is how a reporter on the expedition described Muybridge. "Helios ... had come to Sitka with dismal forebodings that the fog would so obscure the face of nature as to render his art valueless; but now he had struck a streak of sunshine and was determined to make pictures while it lasted. With shirt-sleeves rolled up, and hair on end, he trotted his flying studio through the town while the daylight lasted, and was enabled to get a number of excellent views."⁵



The Tlingit Chief Andáa is believed to be the figure pictured here. (Detail of No. 490, page 28.). COLLECTION PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Muybridge's photographs were the earliest of Alaska to be commercially distributed, providing the general public with its first visual impression of the new American territory. They were also the first to be made of Tlingit people and of Sitka and the southeast.⁶

As was typical of Muybridge, he strayed from his narrow commission to photograph military forts and harbors. Of his 39 published views, the most compelling are of people.

Halleck liked the pictures, and told Muybridge so. "These views, besides being beautiful works of art, give a more correct idea of Alaska, its scenery + vegetation, than can be obtained from any written description of that country."⁷

If manifest destiny served as the ideology of U.S. expansion, and economic opportunity its motive, then new technologies provided the engine. Telegraphs, trains, and steam powered ships shrank time and space, pulling once remote locales like Alaska within easy reach.

"Mail and telegraph communications will very soon be established between Sitka and San Francisco, and thence with all parts of America, Europe and Asia," Halleck wrote prior to the expedition. "With these facilities for trade and commerce with other parts of the world, this new territory must soon become, what nature intended it to be, and what it has frequently been called 'The New England of the Pacific.'"⁸

The camera played a vital role, too. Photographs fed the public's imagination, inviting viewers to venture west to the new frontier. Muybridge's first photographs, made in 1867, were commissioned to promote tourism in Yosemite Valley.

Regarding Alaska, Muybridge's views helped counteract the widely held belief that the territory was a frozen wasteland, its purchase (Secretary of State William) Seward's Folly.

"California photographers are doing a good service in many ways by their enterprise in landscape work,



Eadweard Muybridge No. 472, "Russo Greek Priests" in Sitka, August 1868.
Published by COSMOPOLITAN GALLERY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ART, San Francisco.
This image is one-half of a stereo pair. J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM 84.XC.902.4

which is making familiar in the parlors of the nation some of the finest scenery in the least explored parts of the Union,” a San Francisco newspaper wrote in 1868. “Muybridge [*sic*] brings us Alaska in a portfolio of sun pictures that give us a very favorable opinion.”⁹

In his 1873 catalogue, Muybridge lent his own endorsement to the acquisition. “Until the purchase of this territory, [the farthest west of our country,] by the United States, at the instance of that far-seeing statesman, William H. Seward, Alaska was scarcely ever heard of, excepting by the fur merchant and geographer, and even now the most erroneous ideas prevail, both with regard to its climate and resources... The entire coast line is a succession of beautiful scenery.”¹⁰

CANNON OVER THE HARBOR

For Alaska Natives, like the Tlingit captured by Muybridge’s camera, the story was very different. The U.S. had invaded their home, which had belonged to them since “time immemorial.” They had neither been consulted on the sale nor received anything from it. To the contrary, they had been stripped of their sovereignty.

To prevent Native resistance, the U.S. ruled with military force. “A firm and just administration has a more important influence over savages than is usually supposed,” Halleck wrote upon his return from Alaska. “By establishing military posts in the vicinity of the larger tribes or villages, a salutary influence is soon obtained over them.... In this way, the whole country will be gradually opened to our settlers and traders, without the danger of hostile collisions. They will thus learn that our Government is able and ready to compel them to good conduct.”¹¹

Within months of Muybridge’s visit to Sitka, a clash between Tlingit and U.S. soldiers ended in the death of several Tlingit. In December 1869 at Fort Wrangell, the U.S. bombed the neighboring Tlingit village of *Kaachxan.áak’w* for two days before publicly hanging the village shaman.¹²

In his photographs, Muybridge only hints at this version of the story—a cannon points over the harbor



The back of the *carte de visite* presented by Muybridge to the Tlingit Chief Andáa. COURTESY MARY EVERSON

at Fort Tongass; in Sitka, a U.S. soldier, perfectly centered, looms over a group of Tlingit.

The English-born Muybridge is visiting Alaska for the first, and only, time. He is there to serve the U.S. War Department, and by extension to promote the U.S. purchase. He is making views he plans to sell to Euro-American customers who know nothing of the territory. It shouldn’t surprise, then, that his client, General Halleck, would consider Muybridge’s version of Alaska “correct” or that his images would lead a San Francisco newspaper to a “very favorable opinion” of Alaska.

Which brings us back to Mary Everson’s *carte de visite*. Surrounded, as Muybridge is, by unabashed racism towards Native Alaskans, the inscription on the back is striking.

It reads: “To the brave and noble chief of the Tongass, with Helios’ respect.” ■

Marc Shaffer is a documentary filmmaker in Oakland, California. For more information on Exposing Muybridge, please visit muybridgethemovie.com.

1. Leland Stanford's Gift to Art and to Science, Mr. Muybridge's Inventions of Instant Photography. (February 6, 1881). *San Francisco Examiner*.

2. Muybridge, Eadweard. (1893). *Descriptive Zoopraxography*. Chicago: Lakeside Press.

3. Leland Stanford's Gift to Art and to Science, Mr. Muybridge's Inventions of Instant Photography. (February 6, 1881). *San Francisco Examiner*.

4. The Zoogyroscope, (May 5, 1880) *San Francisco Call*.

5. Going to Alaska. Among the Northern Indians—Painted Savages with Modern Civilization—Mineral indications—Morning at Sitka—Not a Fur Country—Concerning Indians—Indian Incrimination—Is Alaska a Good Bargain? (September 11, 1868), *Daily Alta California*.

6. In 1866, Charles H. Ryder made a set of unpublished photographs of the Russian post of St. Michael, on the Norton Sound, as part of a Western Union Telegraph Company survey expedition. SEE: Palmquist, Peter E. and Kailbourn, Thomas R. (2002). *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840-1865*, p. 470. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

7. Letter from General Henry Halleck to Muybridge dated October 13, 1868.

8. THE CESSION OF ALASKA, Gen. Halleck's Official Instructions to Gen. Jefferson C. Davis, the New Commander. (December 12, 1867). *The New York Times*.

9. *Daily Evening Bulletin*. (October 9, 1868). Cited in Braun, Marta. (2010). *Eadward Muybridge*. P. 52. London: Reaktion Books.

10. Muybridge, Eadweard. (1873). *CATALOGUE of Photographic Views Illustrating The Yosemite, Mammoth Trees, Geyser Springs, and other Remarkable and Interesting Scenery of the Far West*. San Francisco: Bradley & Rulofson.

11. Halleck, Henry W. *DIVISION OF THE PACIFIC*. Official Report of Major General Halleck. (December 14, 1868). *Daily Alta California*

12. Jones, Zachary. (July, 2015). *The 1869 Bombardment of Kaachxan.áak'w from Fort Wrangell: U.S. Army Response to Tlingit Law, Wrangell, Alaska*. Washington DC: National Park Service, American Battlefield Preservation Program; Juneau, AK: Sealaska Heritage Institute.



Eadweard Muybridge No. 478, "Group of Indians" in Sitka, August 1868. Note the soldier standing over the group at center. This image is one-half of a stereo pair.

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