SIDE TRIPS

The Photography of
Sumner W. Matteson
1898-1908

by Louis B. Casagrande
and Phillips Bourns

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5"x7" contact prints were made cost 25¢ for two dozen sheets. The "Eastman Kodak Dark-Room Lamp" could be purchased for $1.50 and additional wicks cost $1.00 per box of two dozen. The complete line of convenient Kodak products recognized the restlessness of the age, making it possible for photographers to easily transport camera and darkroom with them wherever they traveled.

On location

Matteson was a restless young man who had not stayed long at any of the several jobs he had held since college. He seemed unable to find satisfaction in traditional employment. Nothing in his letters or notes explains his move to Colorado in 1896. Perhaps he was enticed by the popular photographs of William Henry Jackson, Alexander Gardner, John Hillers, Timothy O'Sullivan, and other pioneer photographers of rugged mountain peaks and valleys of the West, the forbidding canyons, cascading waterfalls, and Indian encampments. For almost three years in Denver, Matteson managed the Overman Wheel Company as regional distributor of the Victor bike. The Company also carried the complete line of Kodak products. In an advertisement to promote bike sales, he wrote of the merits of the Victor Safety bike, and lauded the Kodak cameras which could be carried in a case strapped to the bike. Matteson soon left the bicycle business to take up photography as a livelihood. With his new Kodak camera, he set out across the Rocky Mountains on his bicycle in search of adventure and to make photographs. Matteson might never have photographed except for the ease of it all — the portable camera, the cartridge roll film, and the Kodak carrying case which secured neatly within the frame of his bicycle and into his sense of adventure.

Matteson's bicycle was more than mere transportation. The Victor bike often appears in his early photographs as part of the image. What may seem at first glance to be the result of careless composition of a learning photographer was instead the thoughtful commercialism of a picture taker attempting to make expenses by selling photographs to his old employer, the makers of the Victor bike. The inclusion of his bicycle soon became, however, a sort of signature or whimsical self-portrait.

Matteson's early side trips to Mesa Verde and to the Wetherill ranch appear to have been fruitful for the beginning photographer. The Wetherill ranch had become a base camp for anthropologists and others traveling to Mesa Verde. At the Wetherill ranch, Matteson met influential people who purchased his photographs and who provided the young man with introductions to other interested buyers. Matteson successfully photographed the views, rooms, nooks and crannies, and the unearthed tools and pots of the Mesa Verde site before it was disrupted or damaged by tourists and anthropologists. Matteson's photographs were used time and again in articles and publications about the Southwest and may have had much to do with Mesa Verde being designated a National Park in 1906.

In 1901, Matteson joined anthropologist George Dorsey on the Chicago Field Museum's McCormick Hopi Expedition as one of the two official photographers. It was an excellent opportunity for Matteson to develop his skills while working under the close direction of the demanding Dorsey. Matteson's adventuresome spirit led him on his journeys, but the scientific restraint of Dorsey helped him see the human condition as an impartial observer, a documentary realist. Matteson was to maintain a productive, yet frustrating (and probably not lucrative) relationship with Dorsey and the Field Museum for all of his years photographing in the West. The famous anthropologist and author used

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many of Matteson's photographs in his widely read book, *Indians of the Southwest* (1903), published and distributed by the Santa Fe Railroad to encourage train travel. Photographs by A.C. Vroman and Edward S. Curtis were also used to illustrate the book. The Vroman photographs are credited to Vroman; the Curtis photographs are credited to Curtis; the Matteson photographs were published without credit. In fact, Dorsey failed to even mention Sumner W. Matteson in his book.

Despite the frustrations which Matteson must have felt, Dorsey was as close as Matteson would ever come to having a patron. Between 1901 and 1906, Dorsey purchased many of Matteson's photographs of Indian celebrations and festivals for the Chicago Field Museum, and because he purchased so many, Matteson was encouraged to return to photograph Indian ceremonies year after year. The result is an extensive collection of photographs of the Hopi, the Pueblo tribes, and the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine which are as honest portrayals of American Indians and their celebrations as have ever been recorded.

Some of the subjects of Matteson's camera had also served as subjects for the cameras of William Henry Jackson, Ben Wittick, Vroman, and Curtis, among others. Possessing more modern equipment and better optics than had Jackson, and having a less romantic vision than Curtis, Matteson's photographs of the people and their celebrations at Walpi and Oraibi are controlled and honest "straight" photographs, as are those of Vroman who often worked the same scenes at the same time. They are neither sensitive nor particularly insensitive portrayals. The major difference between Matteson and the rest of the photographic corps is the time and effort he spent in photographing not just the celebrations, but the preparations for the celebrations, the background, and the supporting stories. Matteson made sequential shots of each celebration as it unfolded, anticipating its movements, following its lead. He was not a static photographer and photography in his hands was not a static art. Like the modern photo essayist, Matteson moved with the action and managed to record the event before, during, and after. His photographs are more than precise records of the single event; they are photographs of the *mood* of the event — the preparations, processions, and people. They are the true story of the celebration.

People in their positive pursuits: His common theme

For almost a decade, Matteson journeyed widely with little apparent plan except to enjoy life and photograph as he went. As he traveled farther afield, the bicycle disappeared from his photographs. He wrote Dorsey in 1906, "Have no idea of where I am going or why except to get all I can." In consideration of today's photo journeys in which a photographer may make thousands of negatives in order to get a few successful photographs, Matteson may not have "got" very much. His life's production appears to be less than 12,000 photographs. There are very few "throwaways" in Matteson's body of work, however. Certainly some photographs are more interesting than others, and some are of little importance and minimal interest. Even so, Matteson seems to have held the same respect for each of his subjects and appears to have taken equal care in the composing of the photograph and the making of the negative.

Matteson moved easily into casual associations with people; his wit and obvious charm served him well in his pursuits, and people became the main subject of his camera. Matteson could photograph during the day, develop the negatives in the dark of night, and, using Kodak's "Solio Paper" in a printing frame, could print in the direct sunshine of the next day to present his host or subject the finished "gold toned" or sepia-colored 5″ x 7″ photograph before he left to continue his journey. No

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