

Opinion • Commentary

Daguerre's Medium Holds the Message

IN REEXAMINING the 150 years of its history last year, *The Sun* resurrected the photographic image of its founder, Arunah S. Abell, and his two business partners, William M. Swain and Azariah H. Simmons, to illustrate the story of the early roots of the institution. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding concerning the image itself, made by a process that celebrates its own sesquicentennial next year, has been perpetuated.

The Sun's first historical study,

By Ross J. Kelbaugh

published in 1937, documented the oral tradition that the three men posed before the camera's eye in 1836 on the day they formally entered into a partnership that founded their first newspaper in Philadelphia. This account was repeated in the new history by Harold Williams, a retired editor of the paper. Considering the history of the medium that has preserved these shadows, this just could not have been possible.

The photograph in question is known as a daguerreotype. Named after the medium's French inventor, Louis Daguerre, this was the first widely practiced photographic process in the United States.

In January 1839, it was announced before the French Academy of Sciences that after years of experimentation Daguerre had succeeded in capturing an image of reality on a polished silver plate. Baltimore's *American* and *Commercial Daily Advertiser* eclipsed *The Sun* in coverage of this incredible story when they carried first local news of the discovery in March of that year.

After a lifetime pension for Daguerre and the family of his partner was approved by the French government, the secrets of the "mirror image" (so called because the reflective nature of the polished plate resembled a mirror) were revealed that August to an anxious world audience. By late September, the first publicly exhibited daguerreotype made in the United States was reviewed in New York, which was followed closely by successes in Philadelphia, and even



From left, Azariah H. Simmons, Arunah S. Abell and William M. Swain

Baltimore by the end of October. However, in spite of these technical triumphs, a major obstacle existed.

Early on, the most lucrative use for the daguerreotype was recognized to be portraiture. Many felt their faces worthy of preservation, but few could afford the talents of a skilled portrait painter. For a nation that embraced the ideals of democracy, the daguerreotype offered the promise that all could be equal before the camera's lens. However, to avoid a blurry image, Daguerre's

process required the plate to be exposed in a camera for as long as 10 minutes while the subject remained motionless. Buildings and landscapes proved to be more cooperative than fidgety humans.

American ingenuity rose to this challenge, and further refinement of the process and its equipment substantially reduced sitting times. The first daguerrean portrait studio was opened in New York in March 1840. That summer, Henry Fitz Jr., a telescope maker who had worked on the

first camera patented in the United States, opened the first daguerrean gallery in Baltimore where he offered to make a daguerreotype in less than two minutes.

Fitz's entrepreneurial venture lasted here until the fall of 1842 when he left the city to return to New York where he resumed his optical business. The Monumental City probably did not meet his expectations of financial gain since his product cost about 95 — a week's wages for many of the local community, making business scarce then, and Fitz's daguerreotypes a rarity today.

Eventually, exposure times of a few seconds and improvements developed by other pioneers brought the daguerreotype within the reaches of the masses, and it has been estimated that by 1850, over three million "mirror images" were being made in America. By then, Baltimore was home to at least nine daguerrean galleries as the potential dreamed of just a short decade before had been realized.

But when was the daguerreotype of the somber Mr. Abell and his partners made? Alas, the chronicler of the news of others evidently left his biographers no record. This time the medium is truly the message.

Judging from the characteristics of the original image which resides in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society, a time somewhere within the daguerreotype's "silver age" of the early 1850s seems more appropriate. In 1855, Simmons died in Philadelphia, and the sun soon began to set on the era of the daguerreotype, a victim to a newer "improved" photographic process.

Perhaps Abell's partners had traveled one day from Philadelphia in 1850 to visit the editor at the site of their financial gamble. While here, the three gentlemen decided to walk to a local gallery wearing their beaver hats to "take a likeness" in celebration of their successful relationship. The miracle of the daguerreotype preserved for eternity the shadows of the men who had brought to Baltimore "Light for All."

Mr. Kelbaugh, a history teacher at Catonsville High School, has written a history of photography in Maryland, due out next year.