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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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THE EXACT INSTANT, EVENTS AND FACES IN 100 YEARS OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHY,
OPENS AT MUSEUM FEBRUARY 9

Edward Steichen, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, has assembled about 300 photographs covering American camera reporting from the past 100 years in an exhibition to occupy the entire first floor of the Museum of Modern Art from February 9 to May 1. The range covered includes what are generally referred to as spot news, feature, documentary and story-telling photographs as printed in our daily newspapers, Sunday supplements, rotogravure sections and news picture magazines.

The exhibition material, drawn from news files all over the country, demonstrates that outstanding news photographers are not always from the obvious centers such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, for there are numerous representations from other parts of the country including Louisville, Lincoln, Des Moines, Houston, Milwaukee and Minneapolis. Many of the prints are well known and have been recognized with prizes in such contests as the Annual Graflex show and the Columbia University School of Journalism competition. But along with these better known photographers are found not only those of lesser fame but also a number of new names and some pioneers almost forgotten.

Sources of prints include the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Smithsonian Institution, Eastman House in Rochester, the Museum of the City of New York, the Nebraska and Oklahoma State Historical Societies, private collections from various parts of the country, as well as the press associations, newspapers, picture magazines and press photographers all over the country through the National Press Photographers Association.

Description of the Exhibition:

From the huge mural of the atomic bomb in the foyer, the exhibition starts with a series of images of children in the schoolroom, on the playgrounds, walking home from school, juvenile delinquents, children then and now, sometimes contrasted in pairs or groups. A section on sports combines dramatic action with fantastic and

sometimes grotesquely humorous images. Also there is candor in the shot - "Life in the Deadpan" - of Joe Louis with a grimace on his face, moving drama in the picture of Babe Ruth's last appearance on the ball field.

Three facing walls present people: the first shows famous people in off guard situations, such as the Eisenhower brothers, one of whom has caught his fish hook in his brother's breeches. Next are internationally important people at the United Nations - Russians listening intently, Connally lighting a big cigar - and the teacher who jumped from a window of the Soviet Embassy. The third wall is covered with just people - watching a parade, standing on a street corner, looking at death, children sleeping on a fire escape, Negro people worshiping and singing with up-raised arms.

Panels offer a contrast between people's ways of having fun: college students dancing formally in formal clothes and a debutante "production line" on the one hand; on the other, a family dancing at home with the bed hoisted up to the ceiling, a group eating a picnic lunch on a car bumper, a southern Negro dance.

There is frequent contrast apparent, but at times the themes interweave through the exhibition. Drama and tragedy alternate and flow into the simplicity of a farm occupation or of youngsters' jive.

Politics and elections occupy a section: candidates in their home towns, country polls, the big political conventions with all their fanfare. A free-standing wall is filled entirely with faces: La Guardia, John L. Lewis, Edison and Ford, Molotov and Byrnes, among others.

The earliest pictures in the exhibition appear in a historical section which includes antecedents of the present day news photographer: daguerreotypes of the gold rush in California, Matthew B. Brady original prints from the Civil War, a group of old stereoscopes, one showing Blondin walking a tightrope across Niagara Falls in his precedent setting exploit of 1859.

Here too is the dramatic frenzy of the Oklahoma land run, the famous joining of the transcontinental railroad, a daguerreotype of an early railway wreck, the first aerial photograph. Three series of pictures taken at the turn of the century illustrate special uses made of photography surprising at so early a date. They are manifestations of various and contrasting aspects of life at the time. One, a group of race track pictures, was taken by C. C. Cook, one of the first sports photographers. These are remarkable for their informal and candid recording of the plushy race track society of the period. A second group was taken by Jacob Riis, then a newspaper reporter, who used photography in his crusade to correct social evils - a camera crusade never surpassed. He used his prints for lantern slides to drive home his lecture appeals, as that was the only medium at that time for bringing actual

pictures before the public. Among them is a photograph of the notorious Mulberry Bend district in New York before he succeeded in getting it wiped out. The last group in this trilogy of contrasts was taken by S. D. Butcher among the pioneers in Nebraska, who lived in sod houses. These pioneers dressed in their best to have their pictures taken, and they brought outside, to be photographed with them, their sewing machines, their plants and their fanciest furniture.

A series on the three war presidents serves to point up the development in photographic facility over the period spanned and also the change in the mores of presidents of the United States. A Brady photograph of Lincoln and his generals, formally posed in a row, provides striking contrast with candid camera shots of FDR overseas in energetic conversation with his generals. Facing this section is a large mural of Times Square on V-J Day crowded with cheering people. Two overseas soldiers vigorously celebrating the day appear on a panel set out in front of the mural as if a magnifying glass suddenly picked them out of the Times Square crowd.

Two large inside rooms are hung with representations of personal disaster inherent in crime, accidents, genocide; and of the more impersonal disaster of fire and flood. The first includes scenes of gangsters, thieves, murderers, suicides, heartbreak, electrocution. Images of genocide portray misery throughout the world, largely as caused by Hitler: the death march from Poland, a Chinese wailing, an Indian mother clutching her starving child. In the second room are exciting records of well-known and often remembered fires and floods, including scenes of the Normandie, of the midwest flood, of ancient fire engines. Outside these rooms are scenes of violence for which man is more directly responsible: the Memorial Day Massacre of 1936, the Ku Klux Klan, a Georgia fascist, lynchings, and then the unforgettable days of the Depression.

The role of light in the development of news photography is illustrated in a series of sports shots showing first one made in the open sunlight at the Dempsey-Willard fight, then the indoor time exposure, then flash and finally the strobe light which permits the camera to freeze a boxer flying through the air.

The evolution of the use of photography on the printed page is demonstrated, beginning with woodcuts made from photographs, as in the early "Harpers Weekly" magazine, and the first photo-mechanical reproduction of a photo, as used in 1873 in the Daily Graphic. A portrait appearing in the N. Y. Journal in 1898 which was used incidentally to illustrate a long text about the person, is contrasted with a recent picture page from the same paper where the text consists only of a few lines of caption. The growing relative importance of the picture in the newspaper culminates in the many-page picture spread in the Washington Post of the recent Truman inauguration and the use of a news photograph in advertising.

The historical sequence will be kept up to date on a panel to be changed daily according to the news.

War photographs, with particular emphasis on World War II, end the exhibition. Here are the dead of three wars, the destruction in key spots of the world, the bombers with streaming vapor trails. A sequence on Iwo Jima begins with the first wave of landing craft, a picture that made history in the speed of camera reporting. Forwarded by air and wire, it appeared in New York papers 17 hours after the picture was taken. This sequence also includes the well-known scenes of troops going over the top on the beach, the famed flag raising, the cemetery with endless rows of white crosses, all against a background of Mt. Suribachi.

Mr. Steichen comments on the exhibition as follows:

"The first daguerreotypes were described in 1839 in a New York magazine called The Knickerbocker, 'Their exquisite perfection almost transcends the boundaries of sober belief.'

"Shortly thereafter, a new, enterprising and intrepid kind of daguerreotypist came into the field, and this was the prototype of the present day press photographer. These pioneer camera men were soon photographing scenes and places up and down and across the land. In 1846-47 they were photographing troops in the Mexican War, and in 1850 we pick up their trail in California photographing the gold rush.

"The daguerreotype of Sutter, standing on the spot where he first discovered gold, unknowingly formulated a picture policy that is still used by the press today.

"This exhibition however gives emphasis to the more significant and penetrating news of our time. We have sought to present the more vivid, meaningful and penetrating reportorial photography of recent decades, the kind of photography referred to by W. Lincoln Schuster in the following excerpt from his preface to Eyes of the World: 'Honest news photographs can give us an impact, a startled awareness, a deep flooding illumination which even honest words cannot always attain. In the right hands, an artist's lens is an instrument of truth, a probing and searching instrument. It can unlock secrets lodged in ponderous sociological surveys. It can unseat error and destroy partisan pleading. In such hands, a split-second camera is too precise and too dangerously accurate a reporter to be wasted on the routine and ephemeral panorama of corner-stone-layings and loving-cup-presentations. It should be alert for the crucial things, concentrated on the things that really matter - the trivial as well as the tremendous, folkways as well as crises, laughter as well as catastrophe.'

"Also applicable is the following paragraph by Vincent Jones, executive editor of the Utica Observer-Dispatch, 'Your news photographer shoots from the hip when his instinct tells him that he's going to catch the story. His focusing may be a mite fuzzy, the "composition" might draw reproving clucks from a board of judges - but he'll have the news for you. It may not be perfect - but it will be human, and thus eminently suitable for that most human and imperfect of institutions - the daily newspaper.'