

The St. Paul Camera Club Celebrates Its 125th Anniversary

Bob Muschewske

Photography entered the public consciousness in 1839 with the introduction of the daguerreotype process developed by Louis Daguerre (1789–1851), a French painter who sought to obtain permanent pictures on metal plates by the action of sunlight. Technical advancements in photography continued and in 1888 George Eastman, an inventor living in western New York, introduced the Kodak box camera—a camera that included a roll of flexible cellulose film. Users were required to return the camera to Eastman so the film could be removed, processed, and printed. The camera was returned to the user with fresh film and their finished photographs. Eastman's motto was, "You push the button, we do the rest." His camera is credited with ushering in the beginning of popular photography for anyone. That popularity exploded in 1900 when Eastman introduced the *Brownie*—a small camera with simple controls costing only \$1.00 that produced a 2¼ square snapshot and simplified the photographic process for users. Each roll of film for the Brownie provided the user with six exposures at a retail cost of 10¢.¹

The growth and popularity of photography in St. Paul was noted on February 19, 1893, when the *Saint Paul Daily Globe* printed an article that could resonate with today's audience given the ubiquitous cell-phone cameras and selfies.

There are scarcely any of the minor arts which have received as much attention during recent years as has photography. While it is painfully true that a long-suffering community now and then lifts up its voice praying for the extermination of the omnipresent nuisance—the amateur photographer—it nevertheless is indebted to photography for valuable services without number.

Indeed, it would be very hard to mention any particular field of industry and art which is not indebted to photography for some improvement or other. In the scientific world the camera has performed wonders that were scarcely dreamed of twenty-five or even fifteen years ago.

Given the interest in photography in St. Paul, two weeks later the *St. Paul Dispatch* of Monday, March 6, 1893, carried this brief announcement under the heading, *Events of Tonight*:

Camera club meeting in the Fire and Marine Building (Third and Jackson Streets).

The following day the *Saint Paul Daily Globe* reported that:

The St. Paul Camera Club was organized last evening and the following officers were elected: A.M. Cowley, president; D.F. Brown, vice president; W.J. Towney, secretary; William J. Thorne, treasurer. The club has not

yet decided on club rooms, but the next meeting will be held on the top floor of the Fire and Marine building Tuesday evening next.

Not much is known today about these first officers of the Club, but their president, Augustus M. Cowley, was a prominent banker whose residence was on Summit Avenue. The *Saint Paul Daily Globe* subsequently reported on March 16, 1893, that "fine specimens of photographic work were exhibited" at this next meeting.

Thus, the Saint Paul Camera Club (SPCC) was born.

Membership in the Club for the past 125 years has had peaks and valleys and there may even have been years when meetings were not held. The Club's records are not complete, but the Club's centennial history reports that it was incorporated in 1899.² Nevertheless, the lineage of today's Club can be traced to that initial organizational meeting in March 1893. With a heritage of 125 years, the Club is the oldest camera club in Minnesota and the fourth oldest in the United States. That



Two unidentified members of the St. Paul Camera Club standing in a yard or garden about 1898. Note the camera is mounted on a tripod and the photographer is holding in his left hand a cable that controls the shutter. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Charles A. Zimmerman

Although the St. Paul Camera Club was initially comprised of amateur photographers, one of its members in 1899 was a prominent professional photographer, Charles Alfred Zimmerman (1844–1909). When he was fourteen years old, Zimmerman designed a camera and pioneer photographer Joel Whitney, who had a studio in downtown St. Paul, gave the youth a job in his daguerreotype gallery. Zimmerman subsequently enlisted in the Union Army at eighteen and fought in the Civil War.

Returning to St. Paul in 1865, he resumed work in Whitney's gallery and studio. Two years later, Zimmerman took over Whitney's photography business. With his brother Edward, Charles organized the firm of Zimmerman Brothers, which became one of the largest photographic supply houses in the Northwest. They also published a magazine focusing on photography called the *Northwestern Amateur*.

Source: Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi to the Great Divide, 1839–1865* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).



After Zimmerman had his own studio and had won several gold medals for his photographs, he printed this elegant advertising on the reverse sides of the cabinet cards he made and sold. Photo courtesy of Leo J. Harris.



Charles A. Zimmerman about to head out with his camera in the early 1860s. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

the SPCC has existed for this long is a remarkable achievement considering the revolutionary changes that have taken place in the technology and practice of photography.

Early records kept by the Club may no longer exist, but articles in local newspapers provide information about the Club's initial development. We know, for example, that in 1893 the Club had a room at 14 East Third Street that was "equipped with everything requisite for the amateur photographer" including a meeting room, dark room, and an exhibition space.³ The space was reported "to be equal to that of any amateur photographer's society in the country."⁴ The Club moved to new and even improved facilities in the Arrol Building at 48 East Fourth Street in 1899.⁵ Relocation of the Club's meeting rooms happened with some frequency over the years as the cost

of renting space and membership numbers fluctuated.

The *Saint Paul Globe* reported on March 14, 1894, that the Club was an organization of amateurs and that: "Everybody interested in photography is invited, and especially those desirous of becoming members of the Club. Ladies who wish to become members can make application at that time."

The *Saint Paul Globe* noted on April 30, 1899, that membership in the Club was then open to both professionals and amateurs and the dues were \$8.00 per year (about \$29.00 in today's dollars). Membership during the first decade of its existence ranged from about 50 to 125 individuals. That April 30 *Globe* article lists 110 members with 27 of them being women. The roster included one noted St. Paul professional photographer, Charles A. Zimmerman who established Zimmerman's Photographic Gallery on

Third Street (now Kellogg Boulevard) in St. Paul.

Even though Eastman's Kodak and Brownie cameras were widely used by the general public, it is highly likely that the cameras used by Club members, in the early days, were the larger field cameras requiring tripods, and producing images on 4" x 5" and 5" x 7" sheet film. These film negatives could be used to produce Exhibition Prints for use in Club competitions, or to make Lantern Slides for use in exchanges with other camera clubs. Lantern Slides were enlarged by projecting them onto a screen. Because of their smaller size, Lantern Slides were easier to mail or ship than bulky 16" x 20" or 20" x 24" prints.⁶

The Club held numerous activities for its members ranging from exhibitions of photographic slides⁷ to demonstrations of photographic products and techniques⁸ and photo outings to local sites. The Club

Marion Carpenter

Marion Carpenter (1920–2002) was a member of the St. Paul Camera Club in the 1940s and '50s. In the early 1940s, she studied photography with Ray Allen, a meat-packer in South St. Paul who had a studio in his home. At the time she supported herself as a nurse, but photography was her passion. That took her to Washington, D.C. where she got a job with the *Washington Times-Herald* newspaper. Later Carpenter was a photojournalist with King Features Syndicate and became the first female member of the White House Press Corps, shooting images of Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower as well as Winston Churchill and many other prominent individuals.

Later she returned to St. Paul and started Marion Carpenter Portrait Studio. After her death in October 2002, a donation from her estate was given to the St. Paul Camera Club. The Club decided that a traveling trophy, named the Marion Carpenter Award, would be given each year to the best Monochrome Photojournalism Print.

Source: Nick Coleman, "A Faded Portrait: A Ground-Breaking Photographer Dies Alone and Destitute," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, November 24, 2002, p. A1.



About 1947, Marion Carpenter used this autographed card with a photo of her with President Harry S. Truman as a Christmas card. At the time Carpenter was working for the International News Service as a photographer. Copyright unknown. Photo courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library & Museum.

held evening smokers for the men and socials for the women.⁹

The famous photographer, Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), who has been called by some historians the “father of modern photography” was made an Honorary member of the Club in 1901.¹⁰ Stieglitz, one of the first masters of the camera in describing his work, said: “What is of greatest importance is to hold a moment, to record something so completely that those who see it will relive an equivalent of what has been expressed.”¹¹

In the 1920s the Club was invited to start a weekly evening radio program on photography. Because photography is difficult to explain over the radio, the program lasted only six months.¹² In the *St. Paul Camera Club News* from January 1995, the editor printed a letter from a longtime Club member, Elsie Bahnemann, which is a tribute to Henry W. Fisher (1887–1967) and his daughter, Kathryn Fisher Brown (1919–1994).

Elsie wrote that she and her husband, Howard, had joined the Club in 1932 and that Howard had been one of Henry’s early customers at the Fisher Photo

Supply Company, located for many years at 381 Minnesota Street. Both of the Fishers were very active Club members and were always helpful to Club members and other customers at the business with advice on hard-to-find cameras, darkroom equipment, and various supplies. They also promoted membership in the Club to individuals who wanted to learn more about photography.

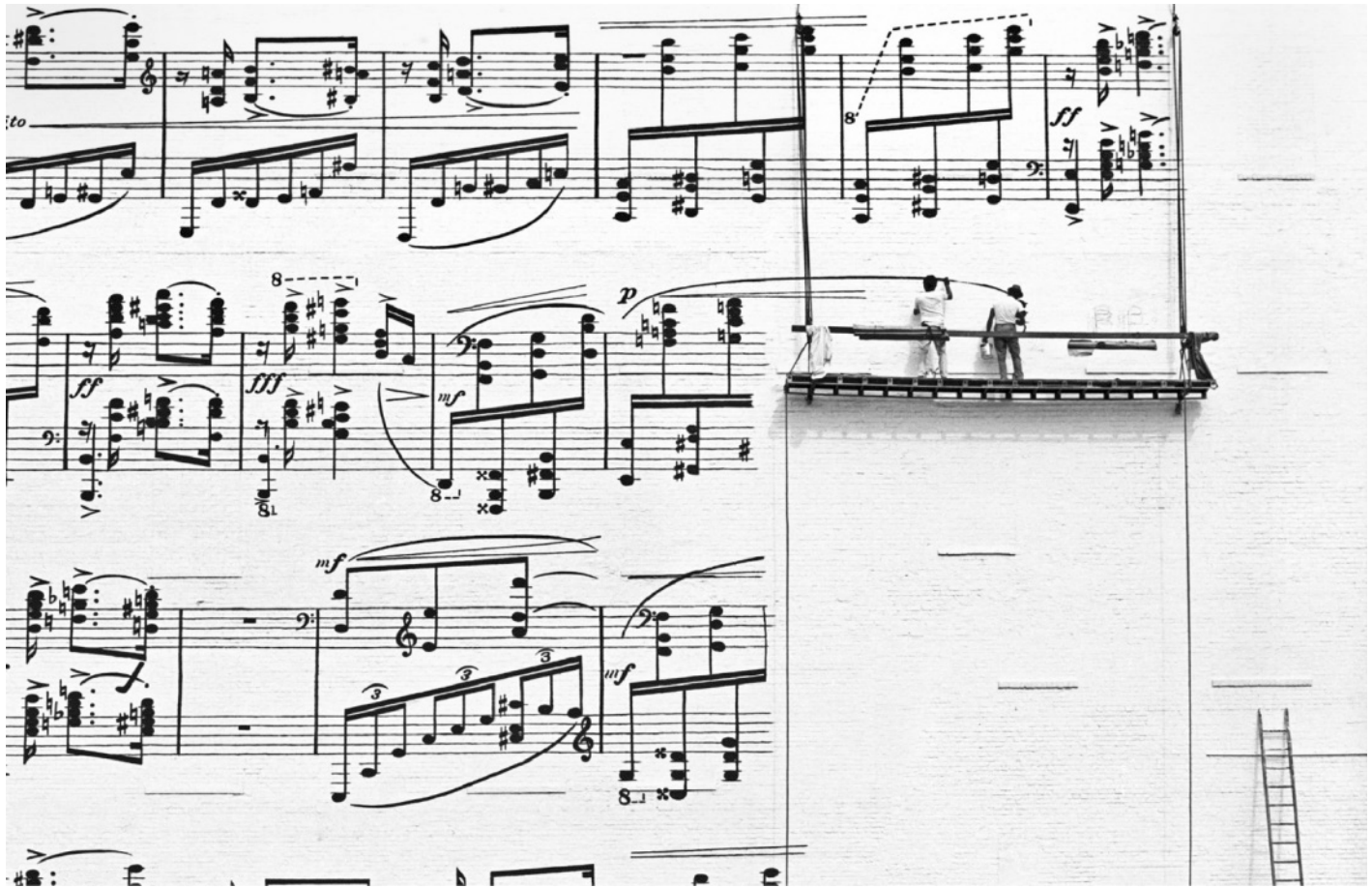
When Henry Fisher died in 1967, Kathryn took over the Fisher Photo business, which relocated to 143–145 East Fourth Street. One of the more memorable programs that the Fishers organized for the Club was a Mathew Brady Christmas Party in 1944 when the Fishers, the Bahnemanns, and other Club members all came dressed in Civil War-era costumes.¹³ Of course, the members then took photos of the costumed participants using Civil War-period cameras.

A second notable event in the Club’s long history happened on March 16, 1971, when the Club held its first color print salon. Until then, all the prints submitted in competition at the Club had been black and white photos. At this

salon, there were thirty-five prints on display.¹⁴

The technology and practice of photography has undergone significant changes since the founding of the Club. In contrast to photographers in the late nineteenth century who typically used large field cameras and learned darkroom techniques, today most photographers use digital or smartphone cameras and learn to make improvements to their photographs using computer software specifically programmed for photo processing.

Despite or, perhaps because of these changes, the mission of the SPCC has remained constant for 125 years—to provide a venue for individuals who are passionate about photography and want to master the art and science of photography. Individuals could choose to learn solely on their own using the many online tools available today. Members choose to join the Club because of the opportunity to have fun socializing with and learning from others who are equally committed to improving their photography skills.



Music Men by Gene Schwoppe.



Club members on an outing. Barry Mullin photo. Photo courtesy of Barry Mullin.

What Is a Great Photograph?

Despite the dramatic changes in the technical aspects of photography since the nineteenth century, there are three universal characteristics that help to identify a great photograph. Yes, as with beauty, a great photograph is often in the eye of the beholder. To be sure there are subjective judgments in defining a photograph as great. These three elements, however, are almost always considered when making a judgment about a photograph:

- **Technical**—Does the photograph demonstrate the best technical features consistent with what the photographer is trying to accomplish, e.g., focus, color, shutter speed, and depth of field?
- **Composition**—Is the photograph pleasing to the eye because of the way the key elements are positioned in the photograph?
- **Interest**—Is the photograph some-



Club members in a joyful mood. Gene Schwope photo. Photo courtesy of Gene Schwope.

thing you want to look at—something that captures your attention? Does it tell a story?

To see how these elements come into play, examine the following picture taken by a long-time Club member, Gene Schwope. It features two individuals painting the page of a music score on the wall of a building in downtown Minneapolis. Gene took the picture in the 1970s and continues to enter it in international competitions where it is a consistent medal winner.

What is it about this photograph that leads many to judge it as “great”?

- **Technical**—Technically it is perfect. Every element of the photograph is in focus. The lines are clear and crisp. The whites are white and the blacks are black.
- **Composition**—Our eyes go immediately to the two painters on the scaffold. Their position in the photograph is pleasing to the eye and are in what is often referred to as the “sweet spot.” Note also that the photograph captures the work that they have already accomplished in painting the musical notes and the white space below them and to the right highlights the work that remains.
- **Interest**—The photograph captures and holds our attention. We are accustomed to seeing a sheet of music but not a sheet of music with two men on a scaffold. We wonder what they are doing. We soon realize that they must be painting the music score on a wall. The ladder on the lower right corner of the photograph adds an extra layer of interest.

Every activity of the Club is devoted to helping members achieve excellence in these three areas and help them make, not just take, great photographs. As noted in the April 30, 1899, *St. Paul Globe*, “. . . the ambitious photographer knows that study and industry is the price of perfection in making pictures.” True then; true now.

How the Club Currently Functions

The St. Paul Camera Club in 2018 has over 60 members and meets twice a month from September thru May. Since its founding, the format of Club meetings has remained remarkably consistent with an emphasis on Salons, Educational Programs, Outings, Exhibits, and External Competitions.

Salons

The first meeting of the month is the salon. Salons provide members with the opportunity to receive critical feedback on the quality of their images. The concept can be traced to early meetings of the Club as noted in a January 31, 1900, article in the *Saint Paul Globe* as follows:

Fifty views taken by the Camera Club at Rockford, Illinois were shown. W. E. Johnson acted as critic, pointing out the defects in the slides, or calling attention to points of excellence.

In today’s Club each member is invited to submit two prints and two digital images. The prints alternate each month between color and monochrome. A category for the digital images is specified for each month. Examples of categories are nature, photojournalism, shadows, travel, and street photography.

The prints and digital images are submitted to a local individual who has been trained and has had experience in judging the quality of photographs. The judge reviews the photographs and rates them on a ten-point scale. The judge comes to the salon and presents each of the prints and digital photographs with a commentary on what made the photograph effective and what would have made it better. The judge also shares the numerical rating. To be sure, members greatly enjoy the satisfaction of receiving a high rating.

The entire process adds to the educational focus of the Club. Members are encouraged to put into practice what they have learned as they take photographs and prepare them for submission to future salons. The feedback they receive from the salon judge helps them gauge their own progress in making better photographs. The feedback is valuable not only for the member submitting the photograph but also for the other members as they compare their own judgment of a photograph with the assessment of the judge. Members understand that although judges use the elements described above in assessing a photograph, each judge introduces subjective elements into the judging process reflecting personal preferences. Discussions of how member assessments differ from the assessments of the judge add to the learning process for all members.

Educational Programs

The second meeting of the month is devoted to education. Invited speakers make presentations designed to help members increase their skills. Recent educational sessions have, for example, covered the following topics:

- Techniques of Night Photography
- The Basics of Cropping and Composition
- How to Tell a Story with Your Photograph
- Street Photography—Overcoming Your Fears
- Use of Photo Processing Techniques to Make Your Photographs “Pop”

Outings

Throughout the year Club members organize various outings which have a dual

purpose: (1) provide members with an opportunity to socialize; and (2) provide opportunities for members to take photographs and share techniques. Examples of outings in recent years are the following:

- Como Zoo and Conservatory
- National Eagle Center
- Hudson Hot Air Balloon Affair
- John Beargrease Sled Dog Race
- St. Paul Winter Festival

Exhibits

Members enjoy the opportunity to display their work in a variety of public settings. In recent years those settings have included coffee shops, hospitals, churches, and senior living facilities. The most recent exhibit was at St. Paul's Landmark Center in the summer of 2016 and featured two photographs submitted by each member of the Club.

The Club will have another exhibit at the Landmark Center in June of 2018. The exhibit commemorating the Club's 125th Anniversary will feature photographs of St. Paul.

External Competitions

A superb way to sharpen one's skills and to receive feedback is to submit photographs to various organizations that sponsor competitions. Fortunately for photographers, there are a host of such organizations including the North Central Camera Club Council (N4C), the Twin Cities Area Council of Camera Clubs (TCACCC), and the national and international branches of the Photographic Society of America (PSA). Club members are regular contributors to these competitions.

A 250th Anniversary?

Will the Saint Paul Camera Club continue for another 125 years? The interest in photography continues to explode. People love to take and be in pictures. Billions of photographs are taken each day with the ubiquitous smartphones. Just as there have been revolutionary changes in photography since the Club's founding in 1893, there will undoubtedly be many changes in the years ahead. If the Club can continue to adapt to whatever changes occur and help its members



Black Glass by Gene Schwope.



Viewpoint by Morris Gildemeister.



Silhouette in the Florence Gallery by Paul Rogne.



Succulent in San Antonio by Peggy Boike.

to both take and make photographs they judge to be “great,” then the Club may well be able to celebrate its 250th anniversary in 2143.

Images by Club members that were award winners in recent regional competitions:

For information about the SPCC check out the Club’s website at <http://saintpaulcameraclub.com>; its Facebook page at [Facebook.com/pages/Saint-Paul-Camera-Club](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Saint-Paul-Camera-Club), or its Twitter address St.PCameraClub.

Bob Muschewske is an avid photographer and a member and immediate past president of the St. Paul Camera Club. He continues to learn how to make, not just take, good photographs. Bob thanks his fellow Club members for allowing him to reproduce their photos in this article and to others for providing content recommendations. He is also a member of the RCHS Editorial Board. Bob acknowledges the research leading to improvements in the manuscript provided by two fellow members of the Editorial Board: Steve Trimble and John Lindley. Steve is a local urban historian and John is the editor of this magazine.

Endnotes

1. Bernard A. Weisberger, “You Press the Button, We Do the Rest: George Eastman and the Kodak Camera,” *American Heritage*, 23:6 (October 1972): 82–91.
2. The few records of the SPCC that are available are found at the History Center, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minn. The only available account of the Club’s history is Ruth Clifton, editor, *The First Hundred Years: St. Paul Camera Club, 1893–1993 Centurybook* (St. Paul: St. Paul Camera Club, 1993).
3. *St. Paul Daily Globe*, June 13, 1893, p. 8.
4. *St. Paul Daily Globe*, May 4, 1893, p. 2.
5. *St. Paul Globe*, April 30, 1899, p. 3.
6. Information provided by Gene Schwoppe, Co-historian, St. Paul Camera Club, February 16, 2018.
7. *The Minneapolis Journal*, January 5, 1901, p. 8.
8. *St. Paul Daily Globe*, December 3, 1893, p. 2.
9. Gene and Pat Schwoppe, “Focus on St. Paul Camera Club,” *PSA Journal* (February 2016): 15.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s, Art through the Ages: A Global History* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016).
12. Gene and Pat Schwoppe, “Focus on St. Paul Camera Club,” *PSA Journal* (February 2016): 15.
13. The anecdote about the Mathew Brady Christmas Party comes from “Brady Scores Hit,” *Popular Photography*, 16:5 (May 1945), 57.
14. Clifton, 21.