

L.A. Huffman: Photographer of the West

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## ■ From the Society

# L. A. Huffman

## Photographer of the West

by Gene Allen and Bev Allen

Laton Alton Huffman arrived in Miles City, Montana Territory, in December 1879. He was twenty-five years old and had come west from Fargo, Dakota Territory, to seek the recently vacated position of post photographer at nearby Fort Keogh, established some three years earlier, shortly after the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Although the post photographer position was an unpaid one, it did provide a dirt-floor log studio and an opportunity to make and sell photographs.

Being on the frontier fulfilled one of Huffman's lifelong dreams. He immediately acquired a horse and camping

gear and headed to the country north of Miles City in search of buffalo and buffalo hunters. The photographs he took of buffalo hunting between 1880 and 1883 are among the few in existence and capture the last years of the once vast herds. The arrival of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1881, and the farmers, plows, and fences that followed, would permanently alter the eastern Montana landscape. Huffman documented this transformation.

By far, Huffman's most extensive body of work relates to the cattle industry, which is not surprising since he co-owned the H Lazy L Ranch near Lame Deer, the first ranch



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Photographer Laton Alton Huffman's ranching experience contributed to his ability to capture action, such as that seen here in *Saddling the Wild Horse, Andy Speelman, Ekalaka*, photographed on July 4, 1894. The Huffman exhibit at the Montana Historical Society, the largest public showing of vintage Huffman photographs and memorabilia since the photographer's death in 1931, includes this image as a hand-colored collotype.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Huffman supplemented his income by guiding eastern scientists and hunters. Here he is pictured with William T. Hornaday, director of the New York Zoological Park (right), and wolf hunter Max Sieber (standing) in front of Sieber's cabin in the Missouri River badlands in October 1901.

in the Rosebud Valley. His participation in roundups and knowledge of cowboy ways contributed to his ability to anticipate the action captured in his images. In this regard, few photographers have matched Huffman's skill and artistry. Historian J. Evetts Haley, in a 1955 article written for the Texas magazine *The Shamrock*, perhaps summed up Huffman's ranching photographs best: "For sheer versatility of significant and historical subject matter close to the range of the grass . . . [Huffman's work] surpasses them all."

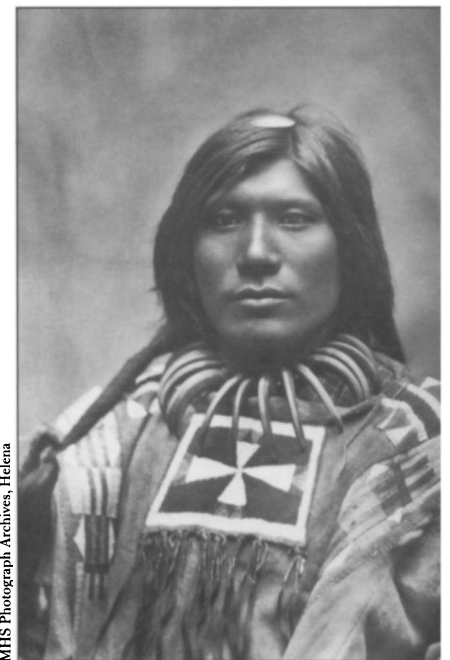
A sociable man, Huffman was active in the Miles City community, and his ability to put people at ease resulted in sensitive and artistic portraits of local residents, military personnel, and Indians. He also supplemented his income by guiding eastern scientists and hunters. Two clients—G. O. Shields, editor of *American Field Magazine*, and William T. Hornaday, director of the New York Zoological Park—became lifelong friends. Shields was the first to publish Huffman's photographs, and Hornaday often hunted with Huffman. One memorable hunt in 1901 led to the discovery of the fossil skeleton from which the *Tyrannosaurus rex* was named.

Although he was an institution in Miles City, Huffman never received widespread recognition in his lifetime. Frederic Remington, for example, based several of his sketches illustrating Theodore Roosevelt's 1888 series on western ranch life for *Century Magazine* on Huffman photographs. These images secured Remington's reputation as a western artist, but Huffman received no credit. When Montana legislators attempted to honor Huffman in 1927 by introducing a bill to purchase a sample of his work, the House killed the bill. It was not until the publication of two illustrated books by Mark H. Brown and W. R. Felton—*The Frontier Years* (1955) and *Before Barbed Wire* (1956)—that Huffman's work received national attention. In 1976, nearly a half-century after his death, the National Cowboy Hall of

Fame and Western Heritage Center in Oklahoma City inducted Huffman into its Hall of Great Westerners. He remains the only photographer to have received that honor.

The exhibit of original Huffman prints and ephemera currently on display at the Montana Historical Society (MHS), *L. A. Huffman: Photographer of the West*, represents the largest public showing of vintage Huffman photographs and memorabilia since the photographer's death. On loan from a private collection, these images—in a wide variety of formats including collotypes and hand-tinted photographs—show Huffman's skills and the various stages of his career. The MHS Photograph Archives also has an extensive Huffman collection. In 1982 Huffman's heirs donated 1,695 vintage film and glass-plate negatives and over two hundred original photographs that had been consigned to Jack Coffrin's studio in Miles City. The public can leaf through albums of prints made from these negatives and order copy prints at the MHS Photograph Archives. *m*

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MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Huffman's talent for putting people at ease resulted in sensitive and artistic portraits. This undated photograph, *Scorched Lightning, Minneconjou Sioux in Bearclaw Necklace*, is one of many he took of Indians.