



Herman Schnitzmeyer (1879-1939)

A photographer who captured the homesteading and development of the Flathead Valley and the railroad infrastructure. Herman was a recluse and eccentric. Although once renowned for his photography, he died penniless and was buried at the county expense. Today, his work is resurfacing as a pictorial history masterpieces.

- **1879-Birth.** Herman was born on November 1, 1879 in Centralia Illinois to German immigrant parents.
- **1900.** Developed a passion and skill for the art of photography. He operated a commercial photo studio in Nashville, Illinois.
- **1910.** Moved to Montana upon successfully winning one of 300 lottery drawings for land when the Flathead Reservation opened for homesteading. He located his homestead of 160 acres on Wild horse Island on Flathead Lake, naming it Apollo Heights. Here he envisioned the formation of a utopian society , The Apollo Club, whose goal would be to gain “further creativeness and a love for the great and wonderful out-of-doors”. This society would operate as a self-sufficient community engaged in agriculture and small manufacturing for the benefit of its members, selling any surplus to acquire needed supplies. Being more of a philosopher than a farmer, Herman’s vision never materialized and he returned to photography to supplement his income.
- **1912.** Worked as an assistant for the Riggins Photo Gallery in Dayton Montana. He formed a partnership with a fellow homesteader, Louise Desch and began making postcards and photos documenting the homesteading boom and important events in the Flathead and Mission valleys. He continued to record his philosophical musings in handwritten journals and to seek inspiration from the beauty which surrounded him.
- **1914.** Sold his stony land on Wild horse Island, re-located to Polson, and opened the Polson Studio photo gallery. He offered portrait and commercial photography. Many of his photos were used for real estate and business promotion in the rapidly growing reservation communities. Although he received much praise for the quality of his work, his main interest was in scenic photography which led him to wander the mountains instead of maintaining regular business hours.
- **1920.** Northern Pacific Railroad took notice of his scenic photography and regularly hired him to do free-lance projects which further deteriorated his business. By 1922, he sold the studio to his apprentice, Julius Meiers, to work exclusively for the railroad. He traveled to Yellowstone Park, the Grand Tetons, and throughout the Pacific Northwest. For the next ten years he documented railroad infrastructure and scenic destinations for the railroad traveling as far as



the Cascades but always returned to Polson.

- **1926.** Short of funds, Herman sold most of his scenic negatives and some equipment to an acquaintance, Johan W. Rode, who in subsequent years moved to Berkley California, put his own name on the prints, and sold them all across the nation as his own original work.
- **1930.** Moved to Missoula and resided in the Penwell Hotel, the Great Depression having snuffed out his free-lance contract with the railroad. He stopped taking photographs completely and occasionally lectured at the University of Montana.

- By mid-decade his health began to fail. He became paranoid, suspecting that the British were trying to take over America. Although cared for by his close friends, Mr. and Mrs. Arceal Henri, Herman was impoverished and too proud to accept charity. A Missoula druggist and friend, Kenneth Vincent, visited Herman at the Thornton Hospital moments prior to his death. Mr. Vincent stated the aging photographer literally starved to death, having reduced his diet to bread and milk. Missoula County buried him in the City owned cemetery in a section with other transients and poor.
- **1939-Death.** Herman died on September 2, 1939 at the Thornton Hospital in Missoula Montana.
- During his lifetime, he was renowned for his photography. In death, he had faded into obscurity. Today, his work is resurfacing as one of the finest histories of the development of the Flathead valley.

In honor of Herman's creativity and contribution to local history the Missoula Cemetery contacted a local monument company, Garden City Monument Services, owned and operated by Bob Jordan. Mr. Jordan enthusiastically donated a piece of granite for a monument, designed and inscribed it, and placed it on Herman's grave. The monument contains Herman's philosophical motto:

Love for Motive

Reason for Guide

Will for Strength

Photo collection held by Denny Kellogg in Kalispell, MT