

Computer techniques enliven old photo

By J B Leftwich

The marvels of computer technology have wrought never cease to amaze me, a former kid who found the typewriter mind-boggling and the radio mystifying.

Computers, with software that can improve the contrast of a picture, remove the red from the eyes in a color photograph, improve focus and eliminate unwanted distractions in backgrounds, bring me to realize how much better the pictures I made during half a century as a photographer could have been.

Our daughter, Barbara, has succeeded me as family photographer. She uses a high tech camera that computes most of the variables I dealt with while using my Speed Graphics, Nikons and Hasselblads decades ago. These cameras were high tech then, but technology then and technology now are different technologies.

Drab old snapshots, some made with box cameras, spring to life when one applies the techniques of Adobe or Picasso to ancient images.

I am looking at an 8x10 of my dad's family depicted in a photograph made in 1900. There are George and Anna Frances, my grandparents with their six children. Two more were to follow, the last in 1904.

Grandpa, wearing a full mustache, and Grandma are seated with Grandma holding one-year old Ellen, a beautiful baby girl with blonde hair uncharacteristic of the family. All others are standing.

The two boys, my dad and his only brother at the time, are wearing shoulder width collars – lace collars, I think. I can imagine times to come these two boys were embarrassed as this family picture was displayed.

Grandpa has on coat and vest, buttoned collar but no tie. His hairline, which reasserted itself in future generations of Leftwich men, forms a V on his forehead. Etta stands at his side with her hand on his arm. Virginia and Cass, my dad, stand in the second row, each with a hand on their dad's shoulder. Mary stands in the second row with a hand on her mother's shoulder.

Only Joe, standing in the front row between his dad and his mother, is touching neither parent. Only Ellen, in her mother's lap, appears to have a wisp of a smile. All others are rigidly stolid.

Two other children, both boys would join the family – Sam, in 1902, and Dallas, in 1904, bringing the total of children to eight, a number that held for little more than a year.

Tragedy struck this family in 1905.

George and Fanny – Anna Frances's nickname - were determined their children would receive an education. Virginia and Mary, the two oldest, were sent by train to attend Pleasant Hill Academy, a two-year high school operated by a missionary society and located just west of Knoxville.

The girls worked for their board and tuition. Early one morning, Virginia reported to the kitchen to help prepare breakfast. She collapsed. Her fellow workers thought she had fallen, but her supervisor felt no pulse and knew she had died.

The family assumed she died of a heart attack, but nobody ever knew the specifics.

Back on their hillside farm near Buffalo Valley in Putnam County, George was in bed sick with the gripe, but he got out of his bed, rode a Tennessee Central train to Pleasant Hill and returned with his daughter's body. He never recovered from his illness and in little more than year, he, too, died.

This left Fanny with seven children, two of them babies, and a bleak future. But Fanny was tough. She set tough standards for her children. Cass, at age 14, became the "man" of the family. Some way, she and her

children managed to make a living. Each child was sent to Pleasant Hill and each child carved out a successful life for himself or herself.

The stern expressions in this computer enhanced photograph may transmit more than a simple lack of happy countenances. Written on their faces is the resolve characteristic of rural people who were just a little more than one generation removed from the frontier.

These are the people who produced the people who today live in comparative affluence and are prone to happy countenances when digital cameras focus on their faces.

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