

The Portraits of Petaluma Pioneers

A Three-Part Project: Accessioning, Digitizing & Exhibiting by Paula Freund

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of Peter Palmquist's *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West* in 2000 by Stanford University Press, the world of art history has been taking notice of the beauty and historical importance of 19th century portrait photographs. The most prominent display of the trend is the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery's long running exhibit, "Lincoln's Contemporaries." Inspired by this exhibition and its scholarship, the Petaluma Museum Association took stock of the PHL&M's early portrait collection and realized what treasures had been resting in their offsite storage boxes. The desire to exhibit the portraits was immediate; however, it was clear that first they needed to be cared for and, if the project was to be done according to 21st century standards, they needed to be available on the internet.

The Petaluma Historical Library & Museum's early portrait collection had been neglected; consequently,



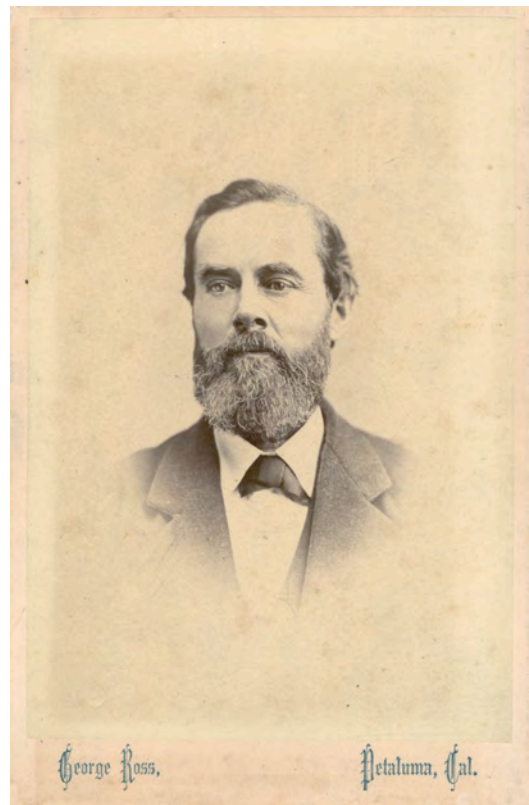
as a first step, the Petaluma Museum Association hired Caroline Costarella, a recent graduate from the San Francisco State University's master program in history, to properly accession, digitize, conserve and store all 400+ images. The PMA is happy to report that Caroline quickly and

professionally finalized the task and has since been working in Washington D. C. as an intern at the National Portrait Gallery.

The records and digitized images of the portraits were then placed on a website, petalumapioneers.org, by Web Developer, Martin Ferrini, with the assistance of Rita Sorpranith. The website was specifically designed to serve as a public archive which is searchable by photographer as well as sitter. It also contains links to other collections containing early Petaluma portraits, an extensive bibliography and an audio tour for the culminating achievement of the

project, "Portraits of Petaluma Pioneers, Personal Images & Public Stories of a California Rivertown," an exhibit scheduled to run from June 10 to September 24, 2017 at the Petaluma Historical Library & Museum.

Research for the exhibit quickly revealed that Petaluma was a favorite location for entrepreneurial photographers: during the second half of the 19th century, our small, booming, frontier, rivertown was home to over 20 photography studios. Petaluma's pioneers took full advantage of the services offered, preserving for us the opportunity to observe their faces and demeanor in rich, intimate detail and connect them to the stories of their accomplishments and to the history of Petaluma. Scrutiny of the portraits revealed many mini masterpieces especially among the work of Bryan R. Johnson (active Petaluma, c. 1863-1867) and George Ross (active in Petaluma 1862-1893). Both were exceptionally skilled portraitists and their work will be featured in the exhibit.



Albion Whitney, cabinet card taken by George Ross, 1870's



Susan Whitney, cabinet card taken by Lewis Dowe, 1877 - 1880.

To compliment the portraits, there will be on display a collection of early celluloid photo albums, Victorian graphoscopes and stereoscopes and selections from the PHL&M's extensive textile collection. Educational videos courtesy of the George Eastman Museum will explain the early development of photography, and a reading table will be available where visitors will have access to copies of the original documents that officially incorporated the city in 1858 and access to primary documents written by Petaluma pioneers including overland journals, and diaries of everyday life.

Events scheduled to compliment the exhibit include: a presentation by the author of the definitive account of Petaluma history, Adair Lara, June 25, 2 to 3:30; the official unveiling by Mayor Glass of the City of Petaluma's 1858 incorporation documents at Petaluma's traditional July 4th Bell Ringing Ceremony; a presentation by Paula Freund, the exhibit's curator, July 15, 2 to 3:30; a lecture by public historian, Arielle Lehman, on the importance of the incorporation documents, August 5, 2 to 3:30; a presentation by the Sonoma County Genealogical Society, August 19, noon to 2:30; a presentation by Gawain Weaver on conserving vintage family photographs, September 2, 2 to 3:30; and a lecture by

Santa Rosa historian, Jeff Elliott, on three crises in early Petaluma history, September 23, 2 to 3:30.

A wine & cheese opening reception has been scheduled for June 10, 5 to 7:00. This will be a joint reception with the Petaluma Arts Center that will also be celebrating their correlating, contemporary exhibit, "The Face of Petaluma." Transportation between the venues will be provided. The Petaluma Museum Association's annual fundraiser will be themed to compliment the exhibit and held at the Hotel Petaluma on June 17th.

All three parts of the "Portraits of Petaluma Pioneers" project have been funded anonymously by a patron of the Petaluma Museum Association and created by its staff and volunteers with inspiration and assistance from the Sonoma County Library, the Bancroft Library, the California Historical Society and the Society of California Pioneers.

19th Century Photographer's Studio

The visitors to the "Portraits of Petaluma Pioneers" exhibit will be able to experience the interior of a 19th century photographer's studio thanks to the generosity of David Silver, President of the International Photographic Historical Organization. Mr. Silver, whose collection of vintage photographica is renowned, created a similar display for the Oakland Museum, and his display for the PHL&M will be housed in the Victorian parlor.

Thanks to both the kindness and talent of Barbara Maxwell, the PMA's artist-in-residence and her assistants Solange Russek and Michael Lanham, her near life-sized reproduction of the façade of George Ross' Petaluma photography gallery will hang outside the parlor creating a complete experience for the exhibits' visitors. Her rendition will be based on the carte de visite dating from 1868 and owned by the Beinecke Library at Yale University illustrated on the back cover.

