

Hello my name is Ben Brown Director and Curator of the Clarke Historical Museum. This month in the Community Case is an exhibit on Emma Freeman, a Eureka photographer in the early 1900s. The following is an excerpt from Peter Palmquist's excellent book: With Nature's Children, Emma Freeman-Camera and Brush.

Emma, like the half-Indian, half-white subjects in her romanticized photographs of Native Americans, was caught frequently between two worlds. Ultimately her art, and her strength, lay in the manner in which she combined the best elements of both.

She was a renegade woman who defied the constraints of the male-dominated world of the early 1900's. She was a photographer intent not on realism but on poetry. She craved artistic recognition but chose to live much of her life in a cultural backwater, a white taking pictures of Indians.

As a photographer, she wavered between the extremes of artistic pretension and hard-headed photojournalism. The Indian photographs do not document the Native American heritage in faithful detail. Instead they express her idealized notions of the Indian as the embodiment of the mysteries of nature. Yet, during World War One, her pluck and daring while photographing the H3 naval disaster off the coast won her fame as an authentic journalist and earned her the title of "Official Government Photographer."

Emma's romantic, artistically-conceived portraits were destined to become very popular, especially among those interested in obtaining fashionable images of themselves. Although portraiture soon became her major emphasis, Emma also photographed many of the more exciting daily activities of Eureka and surrounding area.

Emma capitalized on her considerable distance from other art centers by developing a mode of personal expression that was both distinctive and practical. Her self-concept was that of an artist "on the edge of nature's own wilderness." It was a romantic notion that expressed a freedom to ascend to her goal of artistic recognition. It also represented an escape from the routine of daily life into a fantasy-bordered reality of her own making. At the same time Emma perceived an awakening national interest in the exotic aspects of nature which also interested her. With increasing sureness, Emma proceeded to identify the experiences and relationships that would strengthen her chances of achieving her creative goals.

Emma's goal, judging by her own standards, was never fully reached. Even as her camera seized the outward essence of nature upon which it was focused, it failed to penetrate and satisfy her own vision of the mystery of nature as an inner experience. The elements of beauty and grace were represented, but too often she found the distant horizons of truth and poetry missing in the final result.

Nevertheless, her efforts were remarkable. Emma brought a unique vision to subject matter, for her approach to composition was heroic, her subject treatment allegorical, and her style painterly. Her surviving photographs clearly illustrate her training in the fine arts. Her groundbreaking efforts were made almost entirely on her own; in fact, her contemporaries in the region were purely traditional photographers. She alone enjoyed the reputation of "artist with the camera."

Please visit the Clarke Museum, this exhibit will be up until the end of March 25th.