

Remnants of Power: Tracing Cultural Influences in the Photography of Solomon D. Butcher

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"They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."

Karl Marx¹

*"How well I have succeeded I will leave the reader to judge after
he has . . . looked at the last picture, and hope you will always hold
in kindly remembrance, your humble servant . . ."*

Solomon D. Butcher²

In the late 1800s Solomon Devore Butcher convinced hundreds of families in and around Custer County, Nebraska, to pose for the recording eye of his camera. Part huckster, part idealist, Butcher conceived a dream of producing and selling an illustrated history book. The resulting photographs, although clearly controlled in execution and composition by Butcher, represent a unique collaboration between photographer and subject to produce a visual representation of frontier people.

Inherent in the photographs are three levels of power, represented by the photographer, the subjects and photography itself. Butcher's photographs are documentary *avant la lettre*, distinguishable from later didactic images (where the photographer often holds political and cultural power over the subjects) by a type of "populist" cooperation that produced the images. An analysis of the power relations associated with the creation of the photographs ultimately suggests that the culture of the participants was characterized by democratic ideals.

This approach of analyzing the behavior and the attitudes of the people involved in this photographic process is historiographically unusual, but not unprecedented.³ The goal differs from that of an art historian's in that the overall concern is not to establish an interpretation of the images, but rather the culture of the people in the images. This paper examines the images the prolific Butcher produced to publish a history of Custer County. The numerous later uses and publication of these photographs are relevant here only to the extent that they reveal the photographer's and subjects' original input and purposes.⁴

Butcher's photographs are so unusual not only because of his individuality and the individuality of his environment, but also because of his uncommon intent to produce an illustrated history.⁵ Reflective of Butcher's "unique" goal, his photographs were composed in a uniform fashion. Typically Butcher placed a family, arranged on equal horizontal and vertical planes and seldom in close physical contact, in the foreground of the image. The family was positioned in front of their dwelling (often a sod shanty) and material possessions (horses, cattle, plows, furniture, etc.). Usually the photograph was shot at eye level, although Butcher sometimes made a more panoramic view when he could find higher ground from which to shoot. This uniformity of composition is broken in relatively few, yet important images. These unusual photographs deserve the most interpretive attention as they are the most revealing about the participants.

A recent extensive publication of Butcher's images is John Carter's *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream*.⁶ Like the images in Carter's book, the photographs reproduced here are full-plate reprints of the original 6 1/2" X 8 1/2" glass plate negatives. It must be noted, however, that these reprints are no doubt different than the images Butcher would have produced. Carter found that surviving original prints indicate that Butcher's prints ran the "gamut of quality." "(He) mercilessly trimmed . . . prints to emphasize or exclude certain elements appearing in the negative."⁷ Given the range of darkroom manipulations available (developing time, cropping, type of paper, etc.), the prints produced by Butcher reflected his indifferent technical skills.

A brief biographical examination of Butcher is necessary to establish the method and motivation of his photography. At the age of 14, in 1874, Butcher apprenticed in a tintypist's shop in Winona, Illinois, where he received his first structured exposure to the science and art of photography. However, he spent most of the following years as a traveling salesman until he accompanied his father to Nebraska in 1880 to lay sod. Butcher never was enthusiastic about physical labor: "I soon came to the conclusion," he wrote, "that any man that would leave the luxuries of a boarding house, where they had hash every day, and a salary of \$125 a month, to lay Nebraska sod for 75 cents a day . . . was a fool."⁸ But after fleeing to "civilized" and more industrialized Illinois for a few months, he returned to Nebraska. He built and occupied a house on his land in compliance with the Homestead Act, but relinquished his claim rather than endure the five years of further settlement specified in the Act. Next he briefly enrolled in a medical school in Minneapolis, where he met the woman who would become his

wife. "I had just seen enough of the wild Western life to make me discontented to stay in the east," claimed Butcher in retrospect. He returned to Nebraska in 1882.⁹ He established a photography studio and supplemented the meager income this provided by laboring on his father's farm for 50 to 75 cents a day and as postmaster—a job that earned him a total salary of 68 cents in the first three months. Butcher later joined the Populist movement and became active politically in the late 1890s when he was elected justice of the peace and clerk of the election. Populist concern with tempering individual and institutional power in favour of a more balanced "popular" power influenced Butcher's methods as a photographer.

Photography remained his primary vocation. "Whenever anyone wanted a tintype I dropped my hoe and made it, and went back to the field again."¹⁰ Fellow settlers apparently teased Butcher about his lack of enthusiasm for farm labor, which they considered "real" work compared to photography. "My friends advised me to go on my farm and go to work," Butcher reminisced. "This was an insinuation that rather nettled me."¹¹ He devised a plan that would legitimately demand his skills as a photographer—an illustrated anecdotal history of Custer County. An extended quote from his "memoirs" explaining his excitement about the idea is typical of his fluid, yet staccato and enthusiastic narrative style.

From that time I thought of the plan for seven days and nights it drove sleep from my eyes. I laid out plans and covered sheet after sheet of paper, only to tear them up and consign them to the waste basket. At last, Eureka! Eureka! I had found it. I was so elated that I had lost all desire for rest and had to take morphine to make me sleep. I told my scheme to everyone I met. I talked it constantly.¹²

In seven years he took 1,500 farm views (the surviving negatives form a large part of the 3,500 images in the Nebraska State Historical Society's [NSHS] Butcher collection) and wrote an accompanying 1,500 biographies. Although he claimed "some people called me a fool, others a crank," he evidently was successful in employing his fast-talking salesmanship to sell his idea to even the most reluctant settler. Fire destroyed his written documents (but not the glass plate negatives, stored separately) in 1899. Impatient to realize his goal of a published history (and impatient for its expected income), Butcher revised the parameters of his project. Instead of biographies written by Butcher matched with farm scenes, selected photographs were printed with a general history and autobiographical anecdotes in *Pioneer History of Custer County*, published in 1901.

This overview of events in Butcher's life reveals several key aspects of his character. Impatient, innovative, persuasive and not daunted by obstacles (fire or the insinuations that photography was not "work"), Butcher performed to his own standards and goals. He was a physical and emotional member of frontier culture, yet curiously outside it in temper and avocation. A former salesman, Butcher

“sold” his idea for a history book, and obviously convinced settlers to pause in their daily work routine and contrive poses for the camera. Butcher never would abandon his role as huckster. In 1917 he was peddling an “electromagnetic oil detector,” and in 1924 he promoted “Butcher’s Wonder of the Age”—a medicine (mostly alcohol) that would, according to its pamphlet, “drive pain and disease from the human body, giving ‘Ginger’ and ‘Pep’ to the ailing one, having complete control over all stomach and bowel troubles, healing piles, no difference how long standing, as if by ‘Magic’.”¹³

Butcher also presented his photography as a type of magic. In 1916 he was hired to document—adding names, dates and vignettes—the NSHS’s newly-purchased Butcher collection. These anecdotes, in the style of folklore, are doubtful as to authenticity but are indicative of local attitudes and of the ease with which he could “talk up” a photograph.¹⁴ Butcher claimed that in one instance he damaged a negative and, reluctant to return to the farm to make a new exposure, he concealed the flaw by penciling a figure on the emulsion (appearing in white, Figure 1). With persuasive *sang froid* the salesman in Butcher insisted that he successfully convinced Mr. Hohman (the settler pictured) that the alteration was a turkey, despite a visible fingerprint from where he held the negative as he drew in the bird. Butcher recalls his fib in his annotations to the collection.

Mr. Homan [sic] said, ‘What is that?’ The photographer, trembling in his shoes remarked ‘Looks like a turkey.’ Hohman said it couldn’t be a turkey as the turkeys were not around.



Figure 1: Theodore Hohman and family, Custer County, 1886. All photos in this article are courtesy of the Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

Besides they did not have any white ones. His wife spoke and said, 'Yes Theodore, don't you remember me telling you to drive the turkeys away.' That settled it. But to this day I expect Hohman wonders where that old white gobbler came from.¹⁵

In this vignette Butcher has not assigned himself much of a role in convincing Hohman (Mrs. Hohman allegedly does this) but it reveals his love of narration. Butcher, in this story, acts as a magician in transferring the pose to photographic paper, thus creating scenes which do not exist. Whether or not Hohman ever believed a turkey was on his roof, Butcher's anecdote and his manipulation imply that he considered himself director of the image and could have complete control over its contents. Furthermore, he realized that it was possible for his subjects to succumb to his role as architect of the image; he could introduce any physical element into the image and rationalize its appearance.

Butcher, proving that the photographic image was not sacred and irreversible to him, ruthlessly scratched or pencilled in alterations on at least ten images in the NSHS collection—a small yet significant number. In his zeal to record an anecdotal history of the county he was disappointed, but not daunted, by the technical limitations of photography. He photographed a hill, important to early settlers because it had been covered in trees. Long since felled, no trees appeared in Butcher's original image; he scratched them clumsily on the negative. In Figure 2 he attempted to recreate one of "Uncle Swain's" favorite stories.¹⁶ A



Figure 2: Swain Finch demonstrating how he fought grasshoppers in the 1870s, Custer County, c.a. 1900.

swarm of grasshoppers descended on Swain's cornpatch in 1876. With a willow bush he "went after those grasshoppers with a vengeance . . . mowing a swath of death in his track."¹⁷ Swain's actions were not of much effect (he abandoned his efforts after one hundred yards) but the story endured. At the turn of the century Uncle Swain re-enacted his story for the camera. The grasshoppers were long gone but Butcher drew them in, making his image a record not only of a person, but of an "event."¹⁸

Butcher was capable of creating other intrusions on his images, external to any input from his subjects. Although in most photographs the subjects stare directly and solemnly at the camera, in a small number of photographs Butcher has imposed an imaginary line to split the gaze, such as in Figure 3. The split gaze in itself was not an unusual method of composition. What distinguishes it, however, and makes it worthy of interpretive notice, is the additional "artistic" imprint of Butcher. He provides a clue that suggests he intended the viewer to be aware of his actions. Only in the split gaze photographs has he included his shadow as photographer—a tart reminder, perhaps, to future viewers of these photographs not to ignore or deprecate his input.



Figure 3: McCaslin family, Rose Valley, 1886.

Butcher's restless, creative innovations suggest that he alone controlled the content of the photographs. However, contradictory evidence in his photographs indicates that he tempered his coercive control with respect for the input of his subjects. He used power and persuasive influence to convince the settlers that they had not only a role (being passively immortalized), but an immediate interest. Butcher sold copies of his photographs to be "sent back home"; the

subjects therefore endeavored to produce images pleasing to them, and consistent with Butcher's visual theme for his book. One proud woman, Mrs. Hilton, planning to purchase a print to send "back East" (most Nebraskans had been born in either the Middle West or the Middle Atlantic states), refused to be photographed in front of her sod shanty (see Figure 4).¹⁹ Her prized pump organ was dragged into the farm yard and the family posed around it.²⁰



Figure 4: David Hilton and family, Custer County, 1887.

Hilton, Hohman (through the anecdote) and Butcher all seemed influenced by the authority of the photograph in its nineteenth-century equation with truth and reality. Not only Butcher and the subjects exercised influence in the production of these photographs. A third aspect of power becomes apparent—the inherent power of photography. A painter was thought to be limited only by imagination; a camera could see “everything.” Oliver Wendell Holmes’ analysis of photography, “truth in perfect harmonious affirmation of the realities of nature,” is echoed by Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote that “the closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, more perfect identity of aspect with the thing presented.”²¹ Holmes and Poe, although intellectual and articulate in comparison to Nebraskan settlers, nonetheless reflect popular reaction to the awesome precision of this new technology. Butcher hoped that photographs of the frontier could preserve it with realistic honesty—or at least he hoped he could convince the settlers of the veracity of the photograph so as to have them participate in his scheme. Through the story of Hohman, Butcher suggests it was plausible for someone to believe even the nonsensical if presented via the inherently credible medium of photography. Hilton apparently thought a photo-

graph of her sod house would be too bluntly truthful about her living conditions. These frontier people were influenced, but not restricted, by popular conceptions about the power of the camera. Butcher gently abused the credibility of photography with his alterations. His camera was not only the “mirror of nature,” it recorded what Butcher thought should be present (such as grasshoppers) to support the narrative of his photographs. Thus he exerted his power over the medium. Hilton, too, evidently realized the image’s message could be manipulated, and subtly, she intruded on Butcher’s control of the image. She imagined viewers of the photograph would think better of her and her family grouped around an organ, rather than a sod house, despite the fact that she and her family were farmers, and her sons did not wear shoes.

Another example of individual variety Butcher allows in the photographs relates to a type of fetishism involving photographs as inanimate objects with extended animate meaning. In Figure 5 a photograph of an absent or dead family member is substituted for that of a real person. Photographs of photographs appear several times in the Butcher collection and betray the photograph’s role of extending immortality to its subjects. In this way the power of the photograph is distorted to suggest an even greater “truth,” the appearance of things or people not present. Figure 5 exemplifies all three origins of power: Butcher (as photographer imposing a definition of composition), the subjects (who insisted upon the inclusion of the photograph in the pose), and photography (in its fetishized role, functionally replacing “reality”).



Figure 5: Henry Luther and family, Custer County, 1887.

One of Butcher's purposes was to photograph people to create documents for the future. Carter, in his recent book, compares Butcher's images to those of Jacob Riis.²² Joanne Jacobson notes that Wright Morris (a Nebraskan photographer active from the 1930s to 1950s) was "aware of and sympathetic to the . . . precedent of Solomon Butcher" and Butcher's "historical mission." Morris claimed to share with Butcher a sense of "accountability" to a receding past.²³ This sense of accountability, however, has been imposed on Butcher, who predates the semantic origins of the "documentary." Yet his photographs and purpose are documentary *avant la lettre*. Because of the retrospective label of "accountability" and because of his intent to produce historical records, a dialogue can be established between the photographs of Butcher and those of "documentary" photographers. Images produced by Butcher share a certain similarity with those of Jacob Riis or the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) team in deliberately recording a society or culture for an audience exterior to the recorded society or culture. While Riis and the FSA themselves were members of the audience, Butcher was a member of the culture he recorded. Butcher's photographs do not have the same political atmosphere of external reformism as contained in the FSA photographs. T.V. Reed, in his analysis of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the celebrated visual-literary collaboration of Walker Evans and James Agee, claims *Praise* is an allegory of "relations between those of us with the power to represent others and those we claim to represent."²⁴ While Evans and Agee's power was based on political class domination, Butcher's power to represent in these non-didactic photographs was based on his ability to "seduce" the settlers to co-operate and participate in his scheme. For the subjects of Butcher's images, photography was a privilege (recording their success), not a burden (recording their destitution) and therefore lessened the necessity for salesmanship.

Butcher knew that within the limits of the science and art of photography, he alone could control the image. The story of Hohman and the turkey provides striking evidence. The contradictory tempering of power suggested by the photograph of the Hilton family suggests that Butcher was influenced, but not entirely ruled by the ideals of populism. When "the people" (his subjects) demanded a share of power, Butcher, although coercive by nature, respected their wishes. That so coercive a character could accept a cooperative effort is evidence of the power of populism in this culture. Butcher, however, clearly provided overall direction in these photographs. Like Evans and Riis, Butcher crafted formal visual representation of a group of people. Unlike FSA-style reformist photographs, Butcher's photographs are the result of "populist" collaboration.

Populism is a term with inherent political associations, but Lawrence Goodwyn suggests that populism can also be interpreted as a social phenomenon. Populism, Goodwyn claims, was the belief that man is a co-operative (yet still competitive) being: "it [populism] was a new democratic language, fashioned out of the old heritage . . . to give definition to liberating new conceptions about the social relations of man."²⁵ Although indisputably the central manifestation of populism was political, these political motivations affected all aspects of life.

Butcher did not aim to judge frontier society; he intended through a “language” of photography to record it from his own perspective, sensitive, when necessary, to the requirements of his subjects. Butcher controlled the image, but not without input, not without cooperation from his subjects. The photographs can be interpreted to be an attempt to “define new concepts.” Frontier farming was physically and intellectually alien to most Americans. The subjects sent photographs “back East” to help to define their new lifestyle. Butcher realized the freshness of frontier Nebraska and he capitalized on the chance to record and “define” an adaptive and changing new culture. Although Butcher was a salesman and huckster, his character and actions were tempered by these populist notions. In a culture concerned with control by the people versus control of the people, Butcher must have earned the respect and trust of the same people who thought him a bit odd for photographing and not farming. Butcher, opportunist and huckster, was also actively and ideologically a populist as demonstrated by his biography and by his photographs. Similarly the people he recorded seemed influenced by a populist ideology. They refused to submit in whole to either the authority of Butcher or of photography. They insisted, as they would in the political sphere, to have input in the process.

Butcher exercised a moderate and deliberate “democratic” power to create images of people. The inherent power of photography was exploited by the opportunistic Butcher. He saw in photography a popular appeal (e.g. for veracity) that could be translated into monetary terms. Yet the key to this analysis of the photographs is social populism. The three levels of power—Butcher, photography, and the subjects themselves—mixed and interacted with co-operative ideas to produce photographs with a rich interpretive potential for historians. Analyzing the photographs reveals important information about the culture of the participants. The contradictory indications of the power exercised in the creation of the photographs suggests that populist ideas had permeated many aspects of this society. The remnants of power evident in Solomon Butcher’s photographs of frontier Nebraska tell a story of people and their culture.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as cited by T.V. Reed, “Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988), 156.

2. Solomon D. Butcher, *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska and Short Sketches of Early Days in Nebraska* (Broken Bow, Nebraska, 1901), 154.

3. Selected examples of the use of photographs as historical sources include Robert M. Levine, *Images as History: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Latin American Photographs as Documents* (Durham, North Carolina, 1989); Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History from Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1989); Eric Margolis, “Mining Photographs: Unearthing the Meanings of Historical Photos,” *Radical History Review* 40 (1988), 32-48.

4. These photos are drawn from the larger collection maintained by the Nebraska State Historical Society. Some photographs were sold to the subjects before appearing in Butcher’s book

Pioneer History of Custer County. In a 1916 edition of the *Nebraska State Journal* the photographs were extolled as "sunlight and silver" which have fixed "the way in which the Nebraskan frontier built its houses, planted its crops, . . ." etc. Quoted in W.L. Gaston and A.R. Humphrey, *History of Custer County, Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1919), 350. In 1975 *American West* published the photographs with short discourses on sod house construction. John I. White, "Pages From a Nebraska Album: The Sod House Photographs of Solomon D. Butcher," *American West* 12 (March 1975), 30-39. Selected photographs were published by Virginia and Lee McAlester in *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York, 1988) as architectural models. Available to researchers at the Nebraska State Historical Society, the photographs also have been displayed in numerous public exhibitions. Many other examples exist.

5. Although similar in style and technique, Butcher's photographs differ in part from those of his contemporaries because of his intent to produce a historic record. Men such as Timothy O'Sullivan, George Edward Anderson or E.L. Eaton produced photographs of landscapes and peoples intended as a record more for the "civilized" East than for future generations. For a general introduction to photograph of the frontier, see Karen Current, *Photography and the Old West* (New York, 1978).

6. John Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985). Butcher was employed for a short time as archivist of the collection. His markings appear on the images in black; numbers added later appear in white.

7. *Ibid.*, preface.

8. Butcher, *Pioneer History*, 151.

9. Butcher, "An Old Settler's Story," Solomon D. Butcher Papers, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

10. Butcher, *Pioneer History*, 151. In this quote, Butcher mentions the "tintype," which is a cheap, durable photographic image produced on a thin, metal plate. A few tintypes produced by Butcher in Custer County exist in the NSHS archives. The vast majority of the NSHS photographs, including the ones analyzed in this paper, are images produced on a glass plate negative, and printed onto paper—a more expensive technique, which produced photographs of a higher quality.

11. *Ibid.*, 153.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Butcher, flyer for "Wonder of the Age," Solomon D. Butcher Picture Collection, 5170, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

14. See Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore and the Historian* (Chicago, 1971), particularly Chapter Eight, "Local History and Folklore," in which he discusses folklore as "non-fact," indicative of community traditions rather than events.

15. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher*, 14.

16. It is unknown whether Butcher planned to include this image in his original idea for a book, but it was published in the 1903 book. "Uncle Swain" was Ephraim S. Finch, co-publisher of *Pioneer History of Custer County*.

17. Butcher, *Pioneer History*, 41.

18. The 'Uncle Swain' photograph is but one of many in which Butcher recreates an event (such as a gunfight) to be recorded by his camera.

19. Robert W. Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885-1915* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1981).

20. This anecdote was recorded years after the event when Butcher annotated the collection in 1916 for the Nebraska State Historical Society.

21. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly* 3 (June 1859), 744. Edgar Allan Poe, as cited by Richard Rudisill, *Mirror Image: The Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society* (Albuquerque, 1971), 54.

22. In this rather shallow comparison, however, Carter goes only so far as to note that both Riis and Butcher photographed people in a new land or environment, and that the people in Butcher's photographs seemed much happier than those in Riis'. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher*, 21.

23. Joanne Jacobson, "Time and Vision in Wright Morris' Photographs of Nebraska," *Great Plains Quarterly* 7 (Winter 1987), 8.

24. Reed, "Let Us Now," 157.

25. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976), xi, xiii.