

What a Picture is Worth: The Sadie and Emma Ray Photography Collection

Video Podcast Transcript

Minnesota Historical Society

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the eighty-some photographs that make up the Sadie and Emma Ray photography collection are a full-length memoir. The snapshots, taken between 1895 and 1921, document the Ray family's day-to-day life in St. Paul and Excelsior. Viewed chronologically, they can be read as a kind of book, with changes in setting and subject marking life divisions as clearly as chapter headings. The images speak volumes, not just about the Rays' personal history, but about early twentieth century middle class life in the Twin Cities. They attest to the value of visual media to researchers of all kinds, from the novice genealogist to the seasoned family historian. With a careful eye and a detective's attention to detail, we can glean a tremendous amount of biographical context from nothing more than a stack of photographs.

The earliest photograph in the Ray collection, dated to 1895, shows a woman posing with a baby in a photography studio. The infant is dressed in a baptismal gown, so we can be confident that it is two to six months old. The woman's protective posture suggests that she is the baby's mother, a relative or other caretaker.

After the portrait, the collection jumps ahead to 1899. The subject here is also a baby, but a different one, since the infant from the studio portrait would by now be at least four years old. This new baby appears in photo after photo, often alone or with a single adult. The mother figure from the first photo reappears, looking somewhat older. Evidence of siblings is conspicuously absent.

In each of these early images, the baby's dress and surroundings suggest that she is well cared for. The fact that she was photographed so often implies a great deal of affection on the part of her caregivers. But a series of Christmas photos taken between 1900 and about 1915 expresses that affection most powerfully. In each tableau, the child poses in front of a Christmas tree, surrounded by gifts. Clearly, the family has decided to shower attention on its youngest member; the majority of the gifts are children's toys, and she is the only child in sight. The rooms in which she poses are comfortable, but not so grand as to suggest great wealth, making the display of so many presents all the more significant.

As the series continues, the little girl grows up before our eyes. Her hair is bowed, bobbed and re-grown; her dresses change shape as fashions evolve; and her face loses its childish roundness, until she is no longer a child at all, but a young adult.

Other photographs document the girl's social activities. There are tea parties, pony rides, outings to Como Park, and lots of time for make-believe with a beloved doll. While a man who seems to be a good candidate for the girl's father appears in multiple images, there is less evidence of a female caregiver. But as the collection unfolds, one gets the feeling that this mother figure is not absent, but taking the pictures. This makes sense; even the most doting Edwardian father probably would have been outside of the house during all those afternoon tea parties.

A typical middle class mother, however, would not have worked, and would have had time to document her child's daily life. After Kodak's introduction of the point-and-shoot Brownie camera in 1900, she would also have had the technology to do so.

There is more going on here than the spoiling of an only child. Seen through the photographer's eyes, the little girl appears as a kind of miracle—a spectacular event that could end at any time and whose existence needs constant reconfirmation. “She's still here,” each photo seems to say. “She's still with us.” The images telegraph the kind of intense gratitude for a child's life that comes from having lost one, and it seems reasonable to deduce that the baby from the 1895 photograph, absent from all future photos, did not survive.

Records preserved in the collection's accession file confirm the biography suggested by the photos. Sadie Pierce married St. Paul dentist Elmer Ray in 1890. Their first child, an adopted daughter named Marguerite, died in 1895, not too long after the studio photograph was taken. They adopted a second baby in 1898, and it is this daughter, Emma, whose childhood is so lovingly documented in the snapshots. Sadie was an avid amateur photographer and took the majority of the collection's pictures, developing and printing them herself at home.

The family lived at 949 Laurel Avenue—an address that placed them on the periphery of the well-to-do Summit Avenue neighborhood and the mansions of business giants like James J. Hill. Elmer, however, ran a dental practice out of a downtown office at 7th Street and Wabasha, and by all accounts the Rays were middle class. The 1900 state census notes that they employed a single servant and took in a boarder, probably for extra income. Around 1906 they moved to a house in Excelsior on the shore of Galpin Lake, where they remained for ten years.

Revealing though they are, photographs do not merely record the past without interruption, and the Ray collection is no exception. There is no evidence here of Sadie's death in 1916 at the age of 55, or of Elmer and Emma's reaction to it. Accession records tell us they moved out of the Excelsior house, with all of the memories it must have held, and returned to St. Paul. The state census confirms that by 1920 the Ray household, now at 1142 Selby Avenue, consisted

only of Elmer and Emma. It was here that Emma cared for her widowed father until her marriage to Amherst Fry in 1922. Sadie's passion for photography lived on in her daughter, who toted her Kodak brownie around St. Paul to take snapshots of her friends.

Photographs should not be relied on to tell the whole truth of a family's history. Much has been written about photography's ability to distort past events even as it purports to capture their true essence. But used in combination with written records—particularly census data—photograph collections are invaluable tools to the historical detective trying to uncover the past in all its dimensions.

For the Minnesota Historical Society, I'm Lizzie Ehrenhalt.