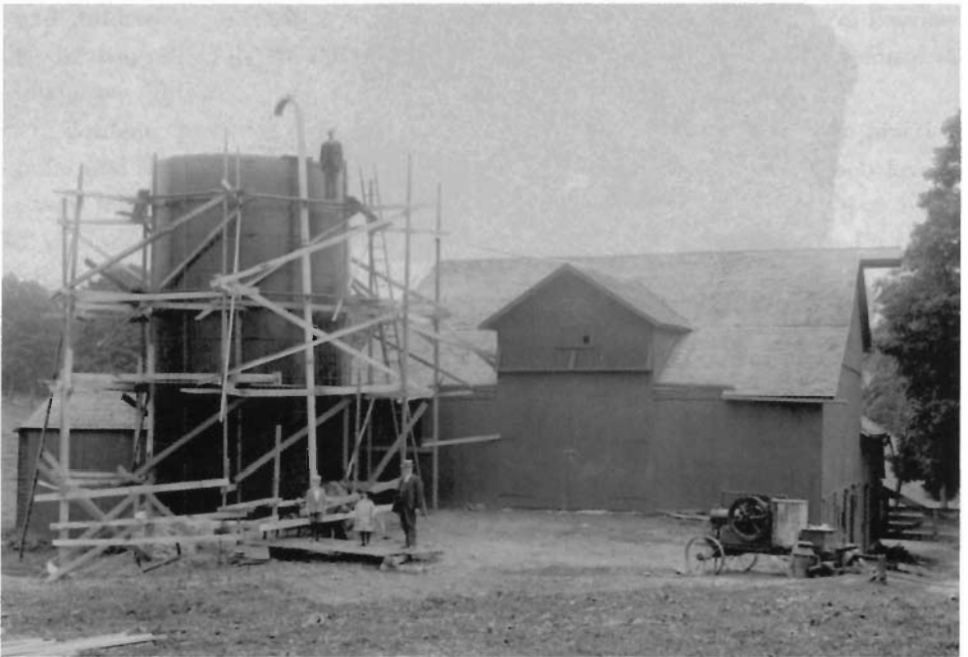


# Sidney Smith Benham – Photographer

## American Vernacular





# Sidney S. Benham Photographer American Vernacular:

by *Laurie Dahlberg*

Hudson Valley farmer Sidney Smith Benham (1870-1944) began photographing in the late 1890s, the great boom years for amateur photography.<sup>1</sup> In 1888, the first Kodak photographic system was marketed with the pithy slogan, “You press the button, we do the rest.” As promised, the customer had only to purchase the preloaded Kodak #1, shoot the film, and mail the entire camera back to Eastman-Kodak for photofinishing and reloading. Thousands of middle-class consumers — men, women, and children — rushed to become image-makers for the first time; by 1896 Eastman-Kodak had tallied its 100,000th camera sale — and all this before the advent of the ubiquitous “Brownie.”<sup>2</sup>

Benham, however, did not belong to the legion of “kodakers” who practiced point-and-shoot photography as a hobby. Instead, he stood somewhere between the casual hobbyist and the professional photographer. The large-format 4 x 5- and 5 x 7-inch cameras Benham used took glass-plate negatives and required a tripod, which entailed far more time and skill than the popular new handheld “detective” cameras. The shadows cast in his brightly-lit interiors also suggest that he may have used magnesium flash powder, a new and somewhat dangerous technical advancement that enabled rapid-exposure photography in low-light conditions, which tells something of the depth of Benham’s photographic knowledge and confidence. Prior to the invention of the light meter, to estimate exposure was one of the most elusive skills of photography, as witnessed by one journalist’s wry note upon the “very successful amateur who recently facetiously remarked that the Hudson River had risen from the number of poor negatives which he had tossed into it.”<sup>3</sup> Most of all, unlike typical snap-shooters, Benham also practiced the more technically difficult end of the process, developing and printing his negatives in his own darkroom. These facts are the more impressive when we consider the probability that Benham was self-taught. Working well into the 1920s, by which time he was also using the smaller roll-film cameras synonymous with snapshot photography, Benham mastered an impressive array of equipment, techniques, and processes.

Benham was working in an era of new ease in photography, for until the perfection of dry emulsions for photographic plates in the 1880s, photographers had used wet-plate processes so complicated and messy that few amateurs ventured very far into

photography. Yet as popular as photography was by 1900, it was still rare to find a serious amateur like Benham living rurally, where there could be little instruction, direct access to materials, or other support for photographic work. Virtually any mid-sized American city at the turn of the century would have had a camera club; New York City boasted six such clubs in 1894 and Poughkeepsie probably had one of its own.<sup>4</sup> Clubs provided the facilities, instruction, and fellowship most new photographers needed to get started and maintain their interest in the complicated and sometimes tedious techniques of photography. But living on his family farm outside of Millbrook in the heart of Dutchess County, Benham was evidently alone in his pursuit of photography.

Benham's pictures display a range of amateur and professional motives, as well. A portrait of Benham's aunt, for example, was made according to the formal and stylized vocabulary of commercial studio portraiture of the day, with Aunt Louise seated before a backdrop, book in lap, soberly engaging the photographer's eye. Other portraits of his toddler son, posed amidst the demure furnishings of a handsome side chair, thick floral carpet, and a scumbled canvas backdrop, belie the fact that the "studio" is actually set up outdoors on the farmhouse porch. This was one solution to the problem of lighting "interior" shots. The solemn expressions of his sitters are a function of the culture of portrait photography rather than the length of exposure; improved lenses and photographic emulsions of the day easily allowed exposures of a quarter-second or less, but the traditional comportment for a portrait sitting still called for restraint and dignity.

A few of Benham's photographs bear similarity to "Pictorialism," a loosely-defined style of photography then becoming popular in artistic amateur circles. Stimulated in part by the proselytizing of Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), America's most famous amateur photographer, Pictorialism was an erudite approach to photography based on pictorial principles gleaned from popular modes of painting such as Naturalism, Impressionism, and Victorian genre painting. Whether by accident or design, a few of Benham's images recall the genteel pastoral compositions of his pictorialist peers active in city camera clubs, such as the distant view of two women seated in an orchard under the blossoming crown of an apple tree. But whereas Benham's urban brethren had to venture outside the city in search of arcadia, or stage bucolic idylls by posing their sisters or sweethearts in the overgrown corners of city parks, Benham was immersed in scenes of authentic country life year-round. Scenes that would strike the urban photographer as deliciously quaint or nostalgic represented a working rural reality for Benham; thus, a photograph of the raising of a new silo or haying time on the farm recognized a moment of pride in the labor and accomplishment of his family, not the burnished longing for a receding agrarian past.

It seems perfectly natural, then, that most of Benham's photographs are clear-eyed documentary views of daily life, which was not a particularly common subject for

photographers in 1900. While there were plenty of documentarians who focused on events, persons, and practices of clearly historical or sentimental interest, it was far more unusual to see the ordinary, inanimate stuff of the everyday — the furnishings of the parlor, or the cast-iron mass of the kitchen stove — depicted as being worthy of a second look. Even when they do not depict humans, Benham's photographs are portraits — character studies of rooms, where empty chairs, drying dishtowels, and mantelpiece knickknacks exude a richly animate presence. In this sense, these pictures look strongly ahead to the work of Walker Evans (1903-1975), one of the giants of American photography. Indeed, Benham's un-fussy views of lived-in rooms and the ordinary folk who created them would surely have been recognized as modest masterworks by Evans, who sought his own inspiration in the clarity and practical inventiveness of the American vernacular.

## Notes

1. My thanks go to Bill McDermott, who compiled the biographical information on Sidney Smith Benham upon which this note is based, and to Virginia Benham Augerson, granddaughter, whose cooperation has made this publication possible.
2. Douglas Collins, *The Story of Kodak* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 92.
3. Clarence B. Moore, "Amateurs and the Art of Daguerre," *Outing*, 17 (February, 1891): 371.
4. Sarah Greenough, "'Of Charming Glens, Graceful Glades, and Frowning Cliffs': The Economic Incentives, Social Inducements, and Aesthetic Issues of American Pictorial Photography, 1880-1902," in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*, 268.

























*Sidney Smith Benham*

1. Silo Construction
2. Aunt Louise – in "studio"
3. Bernice and Stanley on Swing, 1908
4. Sledding on Tower Hill, 1900
5. Living Room with Piano
6. Lillian and Sister Bernice in Tower Hill Kitchen, 1899
7. Horses, Logs, and Stanley, 1918
8. Tower Hill Kitchen, 1903
9. Sunday School Picnic at Tyrrel Lake, c.1910
10. Cyclists' Visit, 1898
11. Smith and Mary (Northrop) Benham, 1910
12. Stan on Hayrake, 1912