

New Vistas around Every Corner

By Lynn Cassidy

I stood on the corner of 5th and Limit Street in Leavenworth, Kansas last week, admiring the beauty of the house known as the “Carroll Mansion,” one of the historic places in the city. A brochure advertising the “National Treasure” in Leavenworth had brought me to this location for a tour and to take advantage of the experts there in historical research. My great-great grandparents and their children had spent some time at Ft. Leavenworth before leaving for a frontier fort called Wallace on the western edge of Kansas very close to the Colorado border. I was hoping to get some help in locating records and perhaps some photographic images of the family.

The “National Treasure” quoted in the brochure was a collection of 30,000 glass negatives made by a process of photography known as wet collodion and another called the gelatin dry plate negative. Both formats consist of a light sensitive emulsion that is fixed to the glass plate base with a binder. In the early 19th century, three different individuals independently developed early photographic processes which were then expanded by Frederick Scott Archer who produced the first wet plate glass negatives. By the 1860’s more people were taking advantage of this process to create detailed and interesting views of life in the times.

The historians and volunteers were busy cataloging and preserving individual images one glass plate at a time. I was able to observe their process. I was fascinated by the clarity of the black and white portraits that captured so many details of the faces, clothing, and landscapes of the time. I was able to see the process the museum employees were undertaking in transferring the glass plate negatives into digital images.

Although no known images of my family were available, the historians there gave me some good tips to continue my sleuthing into history. One tip was to call the church where they would have attended to see if there were any records such as baptisms. Also, they encouraged me to contact the Ft Leavenworth military base library to help with existing records. Whether I ever get all the information I would like, the process of the hunt has led me to some fascinating places and uncovered new vistas around every corner!