

Picturing Utopia: Bertha Shambaugh and the Amana Photographers.

ABIGAIL FOERSTNER

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Beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Bertha Horack (later Shambaugh) undertook work that proved groundbreaking in several regards. She began an extensive photo-documentation of life in Iowa's Amana Colonies. Eventually, she published her landmark study *Amana: The Community of True Inspiration* (1908, reprint 1988), as well as other important works on Amana, including *Amana That Was and Amana That Is* (1932).

In an opening biographical sketch of Bertha Horack Shambaugh, Abigail Foerstner helps the reader to appreciate the ethnographic efforts of an individual whose gender might easily have prescribed other activities at that period, both in American society at large and certainly in the Amana community that she studied. Shambaugh showed excellent judgment in her choice of techniques and technologies, all the while operating in a social milieu where--officially, at least--the use of the camera was proscribed.

Though an undisputed expert on the Amana Colonies, Shambaugh was a remarkably versatile individual, publishing scholarly studies, children's literature, and, along with her husband Benjamin, opening the doors of her home to the thinkers who were helping to shape the future intellectual profile of the University of Iowa.

Having whetted her reader's appetite, Foerstner presents a highly readable overview of "The Amana Experience" (29-38). Make no mistake about it: summarizing Inspirationist history from 1714 to the present in ten pages demands strict selectivity of an author. Nonetheless, I commend Foerstner for setting the record straight on a number of points, for dispelling a fair bit of misinformation that circulates as commonplaces in discussions of Amana, and

for introducing material not often familiar to a general readership.

All who know the excitement of research will appreciate Foerstner's account of her inquiries in the Museum of Amana History and among individuals holding private collections of historic Amana photographs. Official regulation notwithstanding, Amana claimed its share of early photographers, including several (the pharmacist F. William Miller, the physician Christian Herrmann) whose surviving oeuvre is extensive and accompanied by detailed notes on the subject, how it was photographed, and in what context. To her own delight, Foerstner discovered that one well-represented photographer was her own great-uncle, William Foerstner of High Amana.

The subtitle of the work points to the efforts of both Shambaugh *and* "the Amana Photographers." The latter were insiders, and as Foerstner points out, their collective extant corpus presents us something quite different from a family photo album where special occasions are captured: these photos capture *everything* and offer a rare glimpse into a past religious utopia with all its diversity.

We find something as pan-Midwestern as youths testing seed corn (71), and something as characteristic of Amana as group sauerkraut production, with cabbage in the center, flanked by the humans who cultivated it (73), or team gardening of the massive plots that supplied the communal-era kitchens (81). There are church-related scenes (85-87), portraits (89, 92, 94, 98, 103), photographs of children at various stages (65-70, 83, 93, 105, 108, 123), a rich documentation of work activities and the work environment (72, 74-77, 79, 88, 96, 99, 102, 106, 112, 122), and abundant evidence of recreation by Amana residents (113-115, 118).

We see a family (104), a day-worker (97), and even a group of tourists visiting the Colonies (124). Throughout the collection, we encounter all ages and stages of life, and abundant reminders that "both individualism and communalism reinforced the successful self-sufficiency of communities [such as Amana]" (29). We find evidence of awe for the beauty of nature (e.g., Peter Stuck's close-up shots of flowers, 130-134), and a fascination with the human body (reflected in the images captured by Dr. Christian Herrmann, 135-137).

I have cited here only a few of the photographs that strike me as especially salient for a study of Amana's cultural history. I invite others to discover and appreciate their own favorites.

There is indeed more here than we would expect to find in a family album: this is a community album, in which virtually every act provided the special occasion for a photograph worth viewing then, and re-viewing today.

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