

History of the Strauss-Peyton Photographic Studio, Kansas City, Missouri: 1900-1950s and the Strauss-Peyton Photographic Studio Collection at the Jackson County Historical Society (as of 2012)

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Jackson County Historical Society

Benjamin R. Strauss (January 27, 1871, in Cleveland, Ohio - 1952), brother of St. Louis's principal commercial photographer at the beginning of the 20th century, Julius Caesar Strauss, moved to Kansas City in 1900. According to online source material at strausspeytonkc.com, the studio was founded October 1, 1900. Immediately, Strauss began working with motion picture pioneer George W. Curtiss, motion picture pioneer, who had operated in Kansas City since 1894. The team's studio located 605 New Ridge Building was renamed Strauss Studio by 1903 when Strauss bought it from Curtiss. The following year Strauss Studio moved to 216 East 11th Street.

Strauss built his clientele through connections at his Jewish synagogue, whom he portrayed in rather formal, straight sittings. The studio's reputation blossomed, however, when Strauss hired an extremely talented assistant, Homer K. Peyton, who became an artistic collaborator.

By 1909, Peyton was an equal partner and the Strauss-Peyton Studio was first listed in local city directories at 3109 Troost Avenue. In 1910, a second location was opened at 1026 Walnut; the city directory for that year under Peyton's individual listing showed the two studios at 506 Woolf Brothers Building and 3109 Troost Avenue.

Peyton was enumerated with his aunt and uncle in the U.S. Census for Kansas City, on April 16, 1910, as a 26-year-old artist. He reported that he and his parents were Missouri natives.

Strauss excelled at the setting of poses. Peyton was the artist, who performed pictorialist manipulations of the negative to form aesthetic backgrounds, sculpt shadows, and supply tonal drama.

Their reputation for artist, top quality photography grew and after WWI they decided to go national by adding studios in St. Louis and New York.

Together, Strauss and Peyton created some very innovative photography. No two images are alike in this diverse collection, and most are stunning. Peyton's large format prints are noteworthy for their richness of texture and represent a photographic memory and visual "Who's Who" of Kansas City.

Among the preserved images are many of Kansas City's business and social elite, in addition to people who happened to be in Kansas City from other cities, states, and countries. Russia's Anna Pavlova, the most famous ballerina of her generation, was photographed by Strauss-Peyton in 1916, six years after her American debut in New York. Douglas MacArthur is pictured in a 1930 photo before he became the famous

American general who liberated the Philippines and accepted the Japanese surrender at the end of WWII.

Because of Kansas City's importance as a transportation hub, it was the juncture of three different theatrical circuits. Strauss-Peyton, like their rivals, Orval Hixon and James Hargis Connelly, secured a national reputation as celebrity portraitists. Performers who became members of Hollywood's Golden Set worked in Kansas City in their early days: Fred Astaire, the Marx brothers, Mary Pickford, Al Jolson, Charlie Chaplin, and Kansas City's own Jean Harlow are just a few notable subjects.

In 1915, Strauss-Peyton Studio opened a third parlor at the prestigious Muehlebach Hotel at 103 West 12th Street in downtown Kansas City and capitalized on the number of stage performers staying there.

Although the Walnut location was closed in 1916, the Troost and Muehlebach locations were operational through 1926. An entrepreneurial partnership, Strauss-Peyton for periods of the 1920s had branches in New York and St. Louis.

Peyton's ambition as an artist finally grew too great to be content with Kansas City. Peyton went to New York in 1926 to oversee the branch office there. It opened in the autumn at 29 W. 57th. Peyton traveled back and forth several times in the ensuing year; but, left the KC studio permanently in 1927. Strauss and Peyton maintained the partnership until 1929 when the financial footing of the New York office collapsed in the stock market crash.

When Strauss refused to build the New York studio back up, Peyton severed his connection at that juncture and became a solo photographer. Their partnership essentially ended. Peyton never returned to Kansas City. It is rumored that he later moved to the east coast. [I found through the Social Security Death Index one Homer Peyton who died in May 1968 (born March 12, 1894) in Medford, Oregon.]

Strauss, reluctant to abandon a powerful pictorial brand, kept the name of the partnership and directed the business toward civic portraiture. The successful business was operating in Kansas City's elite Country Club Plaza by 1929, and became a fixture there for more than 50 years. Strauss-Peyton remained a brand name in Kansas City. The St. Louis branch eventually altered the name to Strauss Brothers in the 30s.

Frank and Reginald DeCloud and their sister, Marguerite DeCloud Deputy, succeeded as owners. They maintained the studio's same high quality and popularity. Mrs. Deputy recognized the importance of preserving the collection and offered it to the Jackson County Historical Society. In 1977, Mark R. Braswell, purchased the studio.

While the Plaza studio closed years ago, the company does still exist today in the metro area (Overland Park) and can boast being one of the oldest photographic studios still in continuous operation in the United States.

The story of the Strauss-Peyton Photographic Studio Collection at the Jackson County Historical Society began quite unexpectedly between Christmas Day, 1969, and New Year's Day, 1970. The Strauss-Peyton Studio on Country Club Plaza was reorganizing. An accumulation of negatives that documented Kansas City life from the turn of the 19th century was about to be destroyed.

The Society's choice was to accept the negatives immediately or see them go to the dump. Quick action on the part of William Coleman Branton, Jackson County Historical Society president, determined their fate.

Alex Petrovic, then a County Judge on the Jackson County Court (akin to present-day Jackson County Legislature) arranged for their storage in a small county building on Lee's Summit Road. At the studio, Mrs. Hazel Graham, Jackson County Historical Society executive director, supervised the loading of box after box of negatives plus auxiliary ledgers and files.

Eighteen miles away at the receiving end, in drizzling rain, Edwin Constant, board member and volunteer, oversaw the unloading of boxes and their stacking to ceiling height in the little building. The transfer took two days and cost \$800.

A year after the Society acquired the negatives, the bulk of them had to be moved to the basement of the Jackson County Courthouse on Independence Square, and the rest in the basement of the 1859 Jail, Marshal's Home and Museum, as site owned and operated by the Jackson County Historical Society.

Deterioration caused by time, dust, humidity and temperature variations, and periodic flooding of the courthouse basement could not be avoided and will be noticeable in some of the existing images.

It should also be noted that just a few short years after the Jackson County Historical Society saved these important negatives, the Country Club Plaza experienced one of the most devastating floods in recorded history. All of these items would have been completely destroyed if they had not been saved.

Hallmark Cards, Inc., in 1982, made it possible to hire an archivist who was able to clean and re-sleeve a small part of the collection. Halls, Strauss Peyton Studio, Image Point, and Picture and Frame Industries were other in-kind contributors allowing for some images to be reproduced, framed and exhibited over the years.

The earliest Strauss-Peyton Portrait Studio negatives conserved in the Jackson County Historical Society Archives date from Strauss-Peyton's origin in 1900, and span through the 1950s. Of the 80,000+ existing original sitting cards detailing the Studio's daily portrait schedule during this time, only about 29,000 images survive. They comprise an estimated five tons of very fragile, glass plate negatives (and later, acetate or "safety film" negatives), which, in themselves reveal aspects of the history of photography. The Society saved what they could; but, not nearly all of the negatives were transferred. And, it should be noted that nowhere near 50,000 have been lost while the collection has been in the Society's custody.

According to the Kansas City Museum, some 350 images (mostly bridal portraits spanning from 1908 or before through the 1960s) were transferred by the Strauss-Peyton Studio to their Museum, also in 1970. Most all were *proofs* (no mention of negatives). Many of them were mounted directly onto matt board. Over the years the Museum added name placards to them. In addition to bridal portraits, there are also bridal party photos showing the whole family, and a few showing bride and groom. Most appear to have been taken at a church or home, with only a few showing the artistic side of Peyton's work.

Generous grants and in-kind donations from Kansas City benefactors plus unnumbered staff and volunteer service hours have allowed for the on-going work of cleaning, conserving, organizing and describing this collection.

Reproductions are made on-demand from the original glass plates and acetate negatives. An in-house database of extant images is in progress, and available for on-site research. Reprints from the Strauss-Peyton Photographic Studio Collection are \$40.

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There are three great eastern aggregations of Strauss-Peyton prints. One is in the collections of the city museum of New York--in their theater, not their photography collections. They appear as portraits in various stage production folders. No catalogue access, you have to go through the files.

The Rose Collection in the New York Public Library also has a healthy number, particularly from the later 20s.

But the most spectacular collection is in an archive owned privately by Ralph DeLucca, Jay Parrino, and a 3rd partner in New Jersey. In July (2004) Delucca and I went through the large format prints held in this archive. There were over 500 vintage 11x14 prints by Strauss-Peyton from 1915-1929. There were condition issues with some of the prints--perhaps as many as 100 of the 500. But 400 were pristine. There are file cabinets of 8x10 prints that I didn't examine containing hundreds of thousands of entertainment photographs. I wouldn't be surprised if there are many more. Some of the S-P items I own are in 8x10 and 7x9 formats. I am about to make contact with a descendent of Homer Peyton who apparently has a number of the post 1929 material--stuff I would be curious to see. I understand Stephen White II on the West coast has a collection of about 100 prints. But I haven't been in contact with him.

The history I am writing will begin in 1900 with Joseph Byron & Otto Sarony, deal with rise of White Studios, Frank C. Bangs, Ira Hill, and chart the aesthetic transformation of the theater print wrought by Maurice Goldberg, Francis Bruguiere, Baron De Meyer, Charlotte Fairchild, Arnold Genthe, Alfred Cheney Johnston, Nicholas Muray, and Edward Thayer Monroe.

Then I'll deal with the the paradox of how the greatest artistic innovation was being done by figures outside of New York--Hixon, Strauss Peyton, Moffett, Richard Burke in SF--

with only M I Boris in NY matching the extravagance of the portraits. Might say something about Melbourne Spurr in connection w/ this.

I'll then talk about Steichen's take over of the photo chair at Vanity Fair, the formation of the NY Times Studio by Victor Georg, the appearance of Florence Vandamm who would by the end of the 20s be the dominant photographer on Broadway. Discussions of John De Mirjian, Georges DeBarron, G. Maillard Kessler, Marcia Stein, and Hal Phye. Then a coda on the Hollywood talent grab of the late 20s.

I've looked at a lot of material in the past several years from over 150 different photographers who worked the theater, vaudeville, and circus circuits. I've concluded that the ones I've named above are the ones that matter.