



Alice Austen (on the fencepost) and Gertrude Tate at the auto races, May 1902. Photographer unidentified.

Alice Austen's World

Ann Novotny

When she was a woman of forty, the photographer clambered up a high fence beside the race track, focusing her European press camera on the turn-of-the-century automobile speed trials on Staten Island. One friend who was with her raised his own camera to record the photographer—so we can see Elizabeth Alice Austen up there still, athletically balanced on her precarious perch, concentrating single-mindedly on the picture she is taking, oblivious to her observer and to the other spectators around her and not giving a tinker's damn that her ankles are exposed below her long skirt in a most unladylike manner. The lover who was to share Alice's life and her enthusiasms for over fifty years, Gertrude Amelia Tate, is smiling quizzically at the second photographer: she and he may be sharing amusement at how very characteristic this unconventional pose is for Alice.

From the time when she was very young, much about Alice Austen's lifestyle and personality was unusual, according to the social conventions of her time and place. Just before or very soon after her birth in March, 1866, her father, an Englishman named Edward Munn, deserted her mother and vanished home to London, never to be heard from again. The abandoned Mrs. Munn, with her small baby and no means of support, returned to her parents' Victorian cottage on the east shore of Staten Island. She stopped using her married surname, and her bitterness toward her former husband communicated itself to her daughter. Small playmates in the neighborhood soon discovered that one sure way to enrage the little girl known as Alice Austen was to call her "Alice Munn."

Alice's strong personality was formed in the 1860's and 1870's in her grandparents' home, where she was the only child in a household also shared by her mother, her Aunt Minnie and Minnie's husband, and her young Uncle Peter, as well as by two or three resident Irish maids. She was the center of attention for all these adults, who played games with her, humored her fits of temper, encouraged her natural abilities at sports and mechanical skills, and helped to mold the unusual young woman Alice became.

It was Aunt Minnie's husband, a Danish-born sea captain, who changed the very nature of Alice's life by bringing home a camera in 1876. As he experimented with the bulky wooden box and demonstrated it to the family in the garden, Alice watched, enchanted. Although she was only ten years old, she was patient and intelligent, and strong enough to hold the camera steadily on its tripod; her hands were naturally skillful at adjusting the simple mechanism. When the Captain

sailed away again, he gave her permission to play with it in his absence. Uncle Peter may have realized that in Alice's hands the camera was something more than a toy. During his frequent visits home, he showed his enthusiastic niece how to use chemicals to develop the negative images on the glass plates she exposed, and how to make prints from them. He and the Captain were probably the people who helped her further by installing, in an upstairs storage closet, a tiny home-built darkroom (which can still be seen today, with its deep shelves and remnants of Victorian linoleum, in the city-owned house on Staten Island).

Young Alice spent hours on end in the darkroom, developing plates and toning and fixing her prints. Because there was no running water in the house when she was young, she carried the plates and prints down to the pump in the garden, to rinse them in basins of icy cold water, winter and summer, sometimes changing the rinse water as many as twenty-five times. By the time she was eighteen years old (the earliest year from which any of her photographs survive), Alice Austen was an experienced photographer with professional standards.

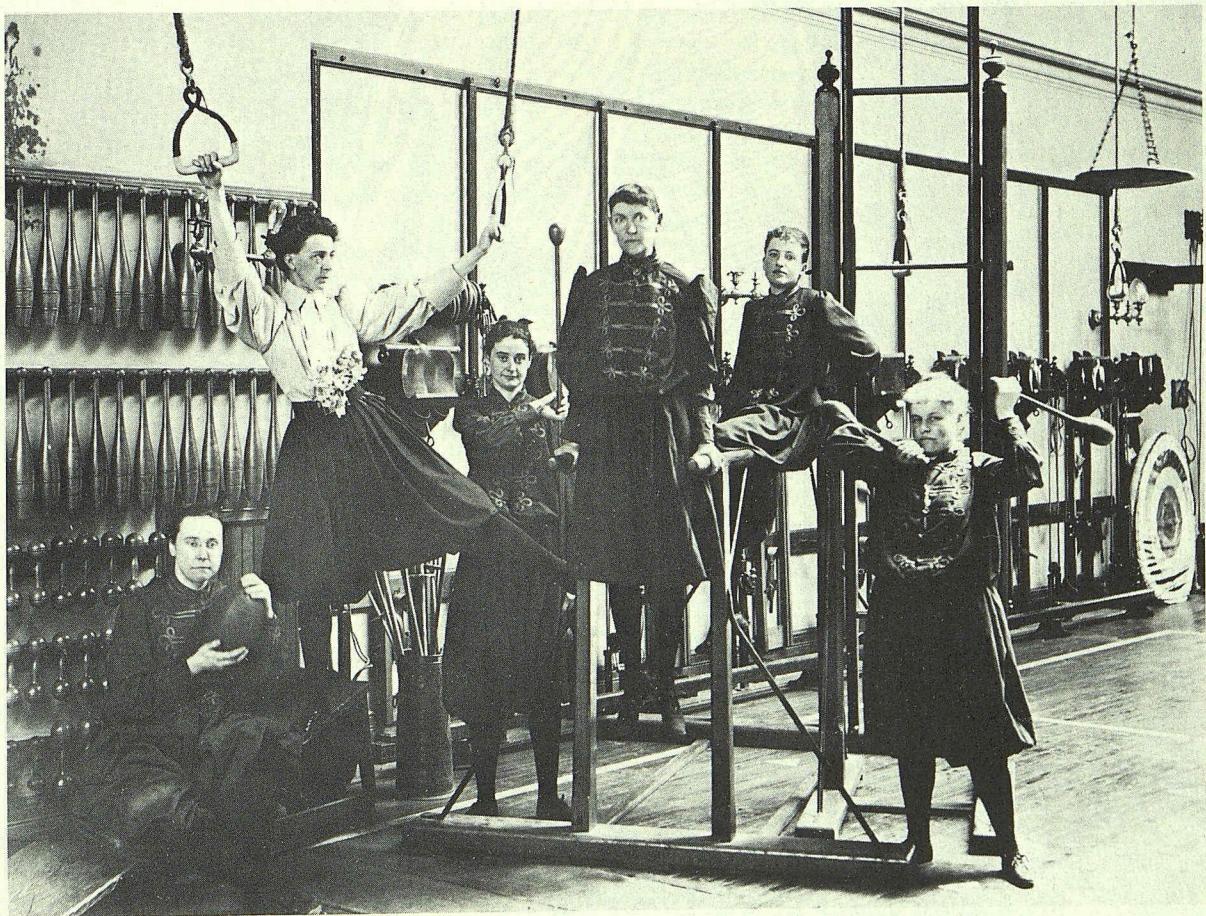
It is worth emphasizing how early this was in photographic history. Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) had only just exposed his first negative by the time Alice's skill was perfected. Alice began to take photographs some twenty years before Edward Steichen (1879-1973) bought his first camera in Milwaukee and twenty years before Eugene Atget (1857-1927) began to record the streets and people of Paris.

The photographer whose work most closely resembles Alice Austen's, Frances Benjamin Johnston, began working as a photojournalist in Washington, D.C., in the 1890's, when she and Alice were both in their thirties. These two women probably never met, and may not even have heard of each other, but the similarities between them are striking. Johnston never married, and it is quite likely that she too was a lesbian, although "her private life remains hidden behind a veil of Victorian manners," as one biographer has written. Like Austen, she was well-connected socially and much-traveled, unconventional in many ways according to the norms of her society, a strong and independent woman whose career also lasted into the 1930's. Johnston became known for her portraits of the famous (Susan B. Anthony, Alice Roosevelt, actresses, and the wives of the Presidential Cabinet) and of the obscure (women workers, Blacks, Indians), and above all for the realism of her documentary photographs (world expositions, Yellowstone Park, coal mines and battleships).

Austen, like Johnston, was a realistic documentary



Mrs. Cocroft did housework for Grandmother Austen while her husband was in the service. Their eleventh offspring is in christening clothes. Photo by Alice Austen, November 1886.



Daisy Elliot, on the rings, Violet Ward (holding the football at left), her sister and other amateur gymnasts perform for Alice's camera. Photo by Alice Austen, May 1893.



Twenty-two year old Alice Austen poses in her Sunday best. Photo by Captain Oswald Muller, June 1888.

photographer—something unusual around the turn of the century, when the women photographers who were her contemporaries made pictures to illustrate Tennyson's poems (Julia Margaret Cameron of England), portrayed pretty landscapes, dressed children as cherubs, posed themselves as nude dryads communing with nature (Annie Brigman of California), or, like Gertrude Käsebier of New York, tried to capture the Eternal Feminine Essence in sentimentalized studio portraits of mothers with their children. These other photographers typically used a soft, blurred focus and emphasized light and shadow in imitation of Impressionist painters, trying to prove that photographs were a form of Art by disguising the fact that they were made by mechanical means—the precise fact that Alice Austen enjoyed about her camera.

Austen lived in the real world and photographed people and places as they actually appeared. She focused her lens so sharply that every small detail of leaf or woodwork, facial expression or lettering on a sign, was recorded. She began with the subjects closest to her—her grandmother's bedroom filled with Oriental vases and Victorian bric-a-brac, the household maids, and her girl friends in the garden posing with their tennis racquets, banjos or swimming costumes.

Instead of romantic idylls of motherhood, Alice photographed the Austens' harried-looking household worker, Mrs. Croft, with her ten small daughters. Perhaps she let the Croft children arrange themselves in the branches of her sumac, because she understood that little girls seldom had a legitimate excuse for climbing a tree. Certainly she never subjected children to the awful ordeal of posing in disguise as little angels. She appreciated them as they were—inquisitive and busy, mischievous and often hard-working (as when selling newspapers on the streets of Manhattan).

The women she recorded are as real and vigorous as Alice herself. Other photographers in the 1880's and 1890's chose to portray nymph-like young women floating in unruffled ponds or dancing effortlessly on tiptoe through flower-filled fields. Austen recorded her own friends in heavy bathing suits that were calculated to impede the movements of all but the strongest swimmers, and she showed them doing gymnastic exercises to develop the strength their daily activities required.

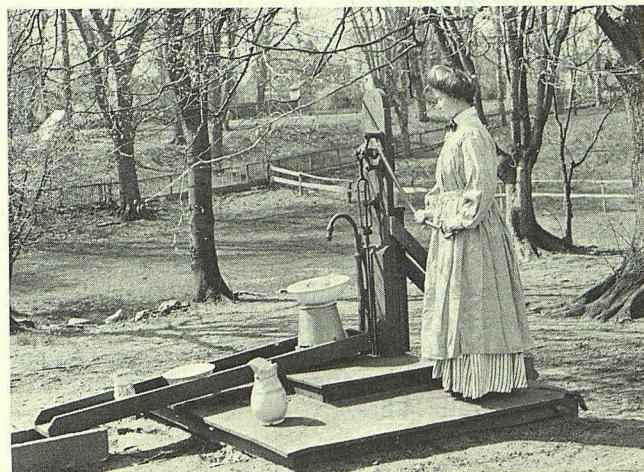
The fact that Alice was a woman, often photographing women, adds a special dimension to her work. No masculine camera could or would have invaded the private sanctum of the young Victorian lady, preserving for us the bedrooms of Trude Eccleston, Julia Marsh, Bessie Strong and of Alice herself, showing us all their souvenirs and home-made decorations. Only a woman's camera would record the unself-conscious affection of young women for one another, and their mockery of the conventional strictures of their society. Mrs. Snively and Miss Sanford would never have kicked up their skirts to reveal knees and ankles if a man had been watching, nor would Alice and her close friends have posed as cigarette-smoking depraved women or—worse still—as dashing young men about town. Alice Austen did not waste any time pondering the essence of femininity.

The fact that she was a woman also means that it was a considerable achievement to have produced a body of work as large (perhaps 8,000 negatives made over more than fifty years) and as excellent as hers. Austen did not have to worry about money when she was young, but

she had to surmount the less tangible deterrent of Victorian social custom. The barriers to be overcome by the serious woman photographer (much more formidable a century ago than today) are described in *The Woman's Eye* by Anne Tucker: "Not only must she find the time and energy to create, and establish her right to do so, but she must know what she wants to express and how best to express it. To achieve this, any artist has to explore and take risks, but so often a woman is handicapped by her public image as a woman.... Exploration, whether of jungles or minds, is considered unfeminine and dangerous.... Beyond the realm of fashion, women are not encouraged to be original, but to look for approval." Austen received all the approval she needed from her family, from Gertrude Tate, and from her close friends. Victorian society was not strong enough to restrict her growth or to undermine her courage. She did exactly what she wanted to do.

Everywhere she went she took her photographic equipment with her, some fifty pounds of it: cameras of different sizes, a tripod, magnesium flash attachment, and glass plates as big as eight by ten inches. In a horse-drawn buggy, she carried her equipment around the unpaved roads of rural Staten Island—to the first tennis club in the nation, to winter skating parties on the Island's frozen ponds and creeks, to musicales in the Wards' house, to masquerades and to bowling parties given in the private alley of her friend Julia Marsh's mansion. Because she very seldom went out of her way to look for special photographic subjects, her pictures reveal her own way of life and her personality. Popular and extraordinarily energetic, young Alice Austen passed busy winters and happy summers in a social life that was, in her own words, "larky," full of carefree sprees and pranks.

But she took her photographic projects very seriously, even though she was not dependent upon them for her income. Time and time again, she transported her equipment on the ferry to Manhattan to document, and finally to publish in a small portfolio the people she called the "Street Types of New York"—the city's newly-landed immigrants, street sweepers, rag pickers and peddlers, the Irish postmen and policemen, the news-girls so poor that they went barefoot on the city streets, and the Russian and Polish Jewish women who sold eggs, chickens and vegetables in the open-air markets of the Lower East Side. She documented the arrival of



Standing in for Austen, a maid demonstrates the way in which prints had to be washed, in ice cold water. "Clear Comfort" had no running water for many years. Photo by Alice Austen.

these immigrants, from the 1890's until about 1910, in an exhaustive series of photographs of the federal quarantine facilities on Staten Island and on the nearby Hoffmann and Swinburn hospital islands. The earliest of these photos, undertaken as a semi-professional assignment for the U.S. Public Health Service, was exhibited in Buffalo at the Pan-American Exposition of 1901.

Alice traveled to that exposition with her camera, as she had done to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in the summer of 1893. She once took her photographic equipment along on a nine-day cruise with four friends through the canals of New Jersey and Delaware. On more conventional summer travels to the mountain resorts of upstate New York or through New England, she photographed scenic views and historic monuments, and—even when hampered by a long-skirted traveling dress—gave not a moment's thought to the obvious risk of crawling along a half-rotten log into the middle of a rapid stream in pursuit of the perfect angle.

On one such summer excursion in 1899, visiting a Catskill hotel known as "Twilight Rest," Alice met Gertrude Tate, who was recuperating there from a bad case of typhoid fever. Gertrude was twenty-eight, a kindergarten teacher and professional dancing instructor, who worked to support her younger sister and widowed mother in Brooklyn. Judging from the small personal photo album that commemorates that summer, Gertrude's spontaneous gaiety and warm humor enchanted Alice, who was then thirty-three. Alice's casual sophistication, her forceful and winning personality, and her comfortable lifestyle, opened Gertrude's eyes to a wider world than she had known before. Gertrude began regularly to visit the Austen house on Staten Island, then to spend long summer holidays in Europe with Alice. But not until 1917, when her younger sister and mother gave up their Brooklyn house, did Gertrude, overriding her family's appalled objections over her "wrong devotion" to Alice, finally move into the Austen house. She arrived just in time to keep Alice company there during her later years, for Aunt Minnie, at seventy-seven the last survivor of the family household, died the following year. Alice was then fifty-two, Gertrude in her mid-forties. They weathered the First World War with brisk fortitude—Alice driving an ambulance for the local military hospital, both of them entertaining officers from nearby Fort Wadsworth and organizing small parties in their waterfront garden to wave Red Cross flags at the returning troop ships after Armistice.

Disaster struck in 1929, when Alice lost all her capital in the stock market crash. She was sixty-three. She stopped taking photographs in the 1930's, for film was too expensive a luxury in years when she was hard pressed to pay bills for electricity, fuel oil or a telephone. She mortgaged her house, then lost it when she failed to meet mortgage payments to the bank—in spite of income raised by Gertrude's dancing classes, the piece-meal sale of the Austen family antiques, the taking in of boarders, and the small restaurant she and Gertrude ran in the house in the 1940's. The house was sold to new owners, who were not patient with two old and occasionally autocratic ladies.

In the early summer of 1945, aged seventy-nine and severely crippled by arthritis, Alice Austen was forcibly evicted from the home which her grandparents had bought more than a century before and in which she had lived for all but the first few months of her life. Her house was not the only loss, for her personal papers disappeared and some two thousand of her precious glass negatives were hauled away to Newark, New Jersey, by the junk dealer who bought the remaining contents of her house for a mere \$600. The surviving 3500 photographs were rescued by a quick-witted volunteer from the Staten Island Historical Society, who spotted them on the upper floor of the house before the dealer got there.

Alice and Gertrude moved into a small apartment in the nearby town of St. George, where Gertrude adjusted cheerfully to her new surroundings, but Alice sat in the wheelchair to which she was increasingly confined, staring with unseeing eyes at the view of New York harbor and mourning for her old home. She was ill as well as miserably unhappy. Gertrude, after giving Alice love and companionship for the more than thirty years they had lived together, was finally no longer able to give her the nursing care she needed. She went to live with her married sister in Queens, and Alice, her money entirely gone after a year in a succession of private nursing homes, was in June, 1950, admitted as a legal pauper into the hospital ward of the local poorhouse, the Staten Island Farm Colony. She was eighty-four.

But the story has a happy ending. One year later, a young editor in Manhattan set out a search for unpublished 19th-century photographs of American women. He discovered the Austen collection of 3500 photographs in the basement of the Staten Island Historical Society, and then discovered, to his horror, Miss Austen herself in a ward of forty beds in the poorhouse. Oliver Jensen, known today as one of the founders of the American Heritage Publishing Company, not only published her photos in his own book (*The Revolt of American Women*), but sold publication rights to *Life*, *Holiday* and other national magazines, raising enough money to release the photographer from the poorhouse and to establish her in a comfortable private nursing home for the last few months of her life. She was interviewed on CBS television, entertained at a party for 300 guests (including many of the old friends who appeared in her early photos), and honored with an exhibition of her work in the Richmondtown Museum. "Isn't the whole idea like a fairy tale?" exulted Gertrude Tate, who visited Alice regularly and who helped to prepare the guest lists.

Two months after the party, Alice suffered a slight stroke and developed pneumonia in one lung. She died quietly in her wheelchair, in the morning sun on the porch of the nursing home, in June 1952, aged eighty-six. "My heart is so full of sorrow at my deep sense of loss," Gertrude wrote to Oliver Jensen. "She was a rare soul, and her going leaves me bereft indeed. . . . God was good to spare me these long years when she needed me so much, so I can only thank him for answering my prayer, that I might be with her to the end."

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Violet Ward on her porch with an unidentified friend. Photo by Alice Austen.



Alice Austen rests in her garden with Gertrude Tate. She had been recording the hurricane damage of September 1944 (her camera is at her right). Photo by Dr. Richard O. Cannon.

Ann Novotny is co-founder of a picture research company in New York. Her recent book, *Alice's World: The Life and Photography of An American Original, Alice Austen (1866-1952)* is available from Research Reports, 315 W. 78th St. N.Y. 10024. The Friends of Alice Austen House are raising funds to restore the photographer's old home and turn it into a small museum of her work.