

It Was 1859 On Shoal Creek

an essay by Dan Estabrook



Experiential Learning

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I was fortunate to come to Penland School of Crafts last August to teach a class. I did my absolute best to fill that space with chaos and creative energy. The class was called 1859, since it was focused on the photographic processes and technology of that year, right at the peak of photography's early history. There was a whole lot of work involved: making wet-plate collodion tintypes, glass negatives, and albumen prints from scratch, using a wide variety of stinky and toxic chemicals, on tin, glass, and paper. This meant a lot of information to cover, a lot of materials to wrangle, and a lot of running around.

Of course, during the whirlwind of a two-week session, everyone needs to take a breath and come down from the mountain for a bit of peace and perspective. For us it seemed perfectly appropriate to take a class field trip to

The Center for Pioneer Life, the newly created site for studying the early settlers of this part of North Carolina, conveniently located just down the road from Penland.

The Center is set to become a place for exploring everything related to the history of the region, from the genealogy of its families to hands-on demonstrations of how they lived. We had been invited to come explore the restored 1850's cabin and its surrounding farmland—including the old-fashioned haystacks—if only for inspiration. With this group, however, there was no doubt we'd be making pictures, too.

While the ostensible lesson of the day was to demonstrate how to shoot tintypes "on the road" with no real darkroom or no running water, the day became as much about the calm of the remote landscape, without other students and other studios—a place where we

almost could be in another time. With only two or three cameras set up, most of the twelve students concentrated on taking their time and getting just one good plate, while helping each other in the process. It was a chance to sit around and think a little, too.

A tintype can be made relatively quickly. Quick in the context of 1859 would be fifteen to twenty minutes, but a fair bit of work goes into each one: A clean plate of blackened aluminum (or thin steel or glass) must be evenly coated with a thin film of viscous collodion dissolved in ether, and then, before that dries, immersed in a solution of silver nitrate for a few minutes.

That silvered plate, still wet and dripping, is placed in a holder that goes in the back of our large-format camera, and the exposure is made. Our exposure times were anywhere from seven seconds to three minutes. The plate — *still wet* — is then developed in a dark box, and fixed to a light-safe state, at which point the photographer can breathe. It can be a bit stressful, start to finish. Add to this the uncontrollable variables of the outdoors (wind, dust, bugs) and a makeshift darkroom, and you can count yourself lucky if it works at all.

We set up our portable light-tight tent on a folding table just behind the cabin — out the way of anything too picturesque, but within running distance to the beautiful



haystacks. Clearly, after nine days of practice at the school, the students' skills were well-honed, and they zipped around the landscape, or held still in the darkness of the cabin attic while they shot their plates. Somehow, they each made their best plates of the entire class, for the most part stress-free.

The weather was perfect, and the chemistry was flowing. We talked about art and music, had lunch on the porch, and lay about daydreaming. I can't say for sure that the spirits of the pioneers were on hand to guide us, but I sure wouldn't put it past them — friendly ghosts riding the ether waves.



Dan Estabrook was born and raised in Boston, where he studied art at city schools and the Museum of Fine Arts. As an undergraduate at Harvard he began studying alternative photographic processes with Christopher James. In 1993, after receiving an MFA from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Dan continued working and teaching around the country and eventually settled in Brooklyn, New York.

*Creating tintypes at **The Center for Pioneer Life** was an amazing experience. We couldn't have asked for a more perfect day as we were shown around the historic home and land. The physical act of creating tintypes was matched beautifully with the hand-built structures. As soon as I walked up the stairs in the cabin, I knew I wanted to make a photograph. The wooden structure of the house was illuminated by the daylight streaming through two windows. I set the camera up, coated my 8x10 plate, and made my two-minute exposure. Then the moment of truth, developing the tintype. The image formed on the tin, dark ghostly shadows outlined by light-kissed wooden beams. I was extremely happy with the results.*

Being in that space at that moment capturing time, felt both modern and historical. It was a feeling I am having a tough time on figuring out how to describe. In our class we joked about time travel but thinking about it, that day felt as close to time travel that I have ever come to in my life. It is certainly a memory I will hold dear and am grateful for the experience.

Liz Ellenwood
graduate student in studio art
University of Connecticut