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Article Summary: Four historians and a photographer "read" two photographs—a panoramic from Garden County taken in 1917 and a modern-day equivalent.

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According to the *Lewellen Optimist*, “nearly 2,500 people and 500 autoes were here, the largest crowd ever gathered in Garden County at one time.” The crowd had come to Lewellen, Nebraska, population two hundred, for the 1917 county fair. Ninety years later this striking panorama is a window into a bygone time.

The Long View Reading a Photograph

Borrowed from the Garden County Historical Society in Oshkosh, the original photo is forty inches long, eight inches wide, and captures a 180-degree field of view.

The accompanying comments were distilled from lengthy analyses by four NSHS historians: folklorist and photo historian John Carter; material culture specialist Lynne Ireland; David Murphy, an architect interested in panoramic views; and Senior Research Historian James Potter.

Serendipitously, Joel Sartore, a *National Geographic* photographer from Lincoln, also saw the photo and was struck by its resemblance to one he took at the eighty-fifth annual Burwell Rodeo in 2006. That photo and his comments help explain the significance of an event panorama from a modern photographer's point of view.

☒ **THE CARS PARKED** in front of the school are at the north edge of James McCoy's pasture, soon to be platted as McCoy's Second Addition to Lewellen.

☒ **THE ABSENCE OF FENCING**, corrals, and livestock suggest there were no bona fide rodeo events at the 1917 fair.

☒ **THE FOUR COWBOYS** in the foreground below (at least one of them African American) look costumed, not simply dressed up. Are they performers? The “Official Progamme” in the Sept. 27 *Lewellen Optimist* lists two “Wild West” performances by Hodgson's Greater Shows.

☒ **LEWELLEN'S NORTH-SOUTH MAIN STREET** ends at the long, low east-west Exhibition Hall left of the first tent. The midway extends on to the south. A few Main Street signs are legible: On the square-fronted white building, “Blue Creek Merc. Co. Lumber—Coal—Implements.” On the dark building with the gable-end front, “Livery Feed & Sale Stable.”

☒ **BY ENLARGEMENT AND MANIPULATION** of contrast and tonal levels, the sign on the small light-colored tent (second from the left) becomes legible: “University of Nebraska College of Agriculture Extension Division.”

☒ **WHAT ARE THESE TALL POLES FOR?** A tent canopy couldn't be raised over the guy wires. Possibly the poles have something to do with the “spectacular plunge” of “Dare Devil Wilson” who “will leap twice daily from a 75 ft. ladder to a board chute below;” or they might support the wire on which “The LaDelles, Fancy Wire Artists” will perform. Could the canvas rolls on the ground belong to the Gates City Amusement Co. who “will be here with two monster 80 foot balloons”?

☒ **IN THE LINE OF TENTS** just left of the tall pole, is a dark colored conical form. Enlarging it brings out scalloped edges and decorative medallions. Could this be the “largest traveling merry-go-round” boasted of by the *Optimist*?

☒ **AT THE CENTER OF THE PANORAMA** the view is to the east-southeast down the North Platte River Valley. The mown floodplain prairie extends uninterrupted to the bluffs. The river is free of the woody vegetation that was a later unintended result of prairie fire suppression, river diversion, and the demise of open grazing.

☒ **A FEW MATURE TREES** are barely visible at the mouth of Ash Creek, the lower threshold of Ash Hollow, where vertical sandstone cliffs punctuate the grass-covered bluffs (on the horizon right of the grandstand). It is a stunning glimpse of how the valley looked in the distant past.

☒ **BY OCTOBER 1917** the U.S. had been in World War I for six months, but there is no evidence in the photograph of a nation at war—no soldiers in uniform, no patriot displays, and only one flag (at the schoolhouse). The *Optimist* of July 26, however, promises a “Red Cross and War Exhibit” supervision by the Women's Club.

☒ **THE CROWD SEEMS DISPROPORTIONATELY MALE**, it seems unlikely the women were all seated in the cars to avoid freckling. These were women, after all, who wore skirts above their ankles and were giving up corsets in favor of the newly designed brassieres. So where was the fairer sex on fair day?

☒ **THE CHOICE OF FORMAT GIVES US INSIGHT** into the photographer's intention. This is not a picture of the airplane or the band or the cowboys, but rather of the entire collective of actions and audience. Every person in the scene, no matter how far away, is engaged with the camera. The photograph means something to them all, right down to the smallest child.



☒ **PHOTOGRAPHER C. O. DEDMORE** is not listed in the 1917 *Nebraska State Business Gazetteer*, but later directories show that Clinton O. “Lucky” Dedmore's North Platte photography studio remained open until 1949.

☒ **THE AIRPLANE IS A WRIGHT PUSHER.** Aircraft expert Vince Gores, a NSHS volunteer, says it was already an antique by 1917. The leather-clad figure must be the pilot. The *Optimist* reported on Oct. 11, “The Aeroplane flights 4 in number were all successful and Aviator Carr showed himself to be an expert in this line.”

☒ **THERE'S NO MISTAKING** the “big 80 foot Ferris wheel.” The group on the platform might be the Hodgson Shows' 16 piece band, but it could be a band from Gering or North Platte. G. I. Stout of the fair board was “in correspondence with both the Gering and North Platte bands and we are assured of the best music in the Platte Valley.”

☒ **THE SUBSTANTIAL, ROOFED GRANDSTAND** appears to be a permanent structure with ten tiers each seating fifteen to twenty people. What other events might it have been used for? Town-team baseball games were common, but there is no clear evidence of an infield to be seen here.

☒ **MOST OF THE CAR TOPS ARE UP**, perhaps to provide welcome shade on the treeless fairgrounds. The number of women sporting summer whites suggests it may have been a hot day. But why are there so few women in the photograph?

☒ **MORE THAN 100 CARS** are parked around the fairgrounds, but no horse-drawn vehicles are visible. By 1917 did everyone in Garden County travel by car? Maybe buggy and wagon drivers sought out shade for their horses.

THE PHOTO IS IN BLACK AND WHITE.

TRANSLATION: EVERYONE IN IT MUST BE DEAD BY NOW.

So often we must guess at what was going on back then, looking past the soft focus, grainy emulsion and costume clothing. It was so long ago. It just doesn't seem real anymore.

A case in point is this photo. It's a panoramic image, surely a rodeo, with cowboys mostly, lined up just so.

Some are smiling.

All are paying attention.

What would you ask any of them about the moment this was taken? Did everyone in town show up? Was it hot out? Was it the first time you had ever been in a panoramic photograph? Most important, was it a really big deal?

On this day, in this photograph, the answer to all of the above is yes.

I should know. I took it.

In 2006.

Panoramics just aren't done anymore. They take time and effort, something we're short on these days. Besides, photography is hardly new and certainly not special anymore. We have cameras everywhere now, from the one in your cell phone to the hundreds hiding in ceilings at every casino and Wal-Mart, watching your every move.

It all started when, my friend, Dale Seidel, called and asked if I could do a panoramic "pitcher" at the next rodeo a few months down the road. I then forgot about it until the day came on the last weekend of July, 2006.

In his black hat, moustache and western shirt with buttons about to pop off around the waist, Dale came to me during the calf roping event and said, "You just tell me when you want the rodeo stopped and we'll get ya lined up." That made me nervous. I realized that history was riding on this.

I took a guess and told Dale we should shoot the photo about twenty minutes before sundown. The arena has a break on the west side, allowing the last light of day to stream right in.

The chosen time came, and rodeo announcer Hadley Barrett stopped the show. A stepladder was dragged out to the west side of the arena. I motioned for all of the performers to come right on up. They hesitated at first, but eventually came around close, in a circle. I was using a wide lens, so the closer the better. And what I saw was amazing.

This was the first time in my twenty-five-year career that a group this big actually paid attention to me. But this was the 85th anniversary photo, after all, so their attitudes bordered on reverence.

Everyone was staring at the black box in my trembling hands. Trick riders in their colorful outfits were front and center, along with the stock contractor, Bennie Butler, and his hired men, all on horseback. Around them, on foot, were the performers—the riders, judges, and clowns. The audience was on its feet. The whole place got quiet.

I worked fast, but at a measured pace so I wouldn't screw up. At the top of the ladder I turned slowly in a complete circle, shooting a single, vertical frame every few degrees, using a Nikon D2X digital camera. I did this twice. Everything would eventually be digitally stitched together into a panorama using Photoshop.

The entire shoot lasted less than three minutes. I waved to the announcer and he called out "Looks like we've got a keeper folks!" and the crowd applauded and cheered. In just a couple minutes it was business as usual, meaning it was time for the chuck wagon races.

The people in Burwell have always thought about their place in time. Of course they still farm and ranch along the Loup River, but we all know that it's the rodeo that sets this place apart. The theater and the motel are named for it, the rodeo grounds long ago listed as a National Historic Site. The town braces all year for that last weekend in July.

If you go this year, be sure to look for the North Side Bar. It's that white, flat-fronted building on the town square, the one with the bronc rider painted on it. Go in and order a glass of cold beer. There, on the east wall, past the cowboys and the tourists and the farmers just in from cutting hay, is their museum: panoramic photos, framed and yellowed by smoke and sunlight, each taken at a milestone in the rodeo's march through the years. They put a new one up last year, sized just right to match the rest.

If you've got some time, just ask. They'll tell you all about it.

JOEL SARTORE



How long did the moment last? All eyes are on the camera—even those in the audience. They must have realized they were part of history that day.

The Burwell Panoramic