

DURING the early 1970s Robert C. Wheeler, former associate director of the Minnesota Historical Society, was doing research for a reconstruction project at the MHS's Forest History Center near Grand Rapids. In the course of that work, he came across a number of photographs by William F. Roleff in the society's audio-visual library. Taken in the early years of the 20th century, they were pictures of logging camps along Lake Superior's north shore. Outstanding in clarity, composition, and subject matter, Roleff's photographs were so valuable to the accurate reconstruction and furnishing of the logging camp that Wheeler determined to learn more about the photographer and to locate more of his unusual work.

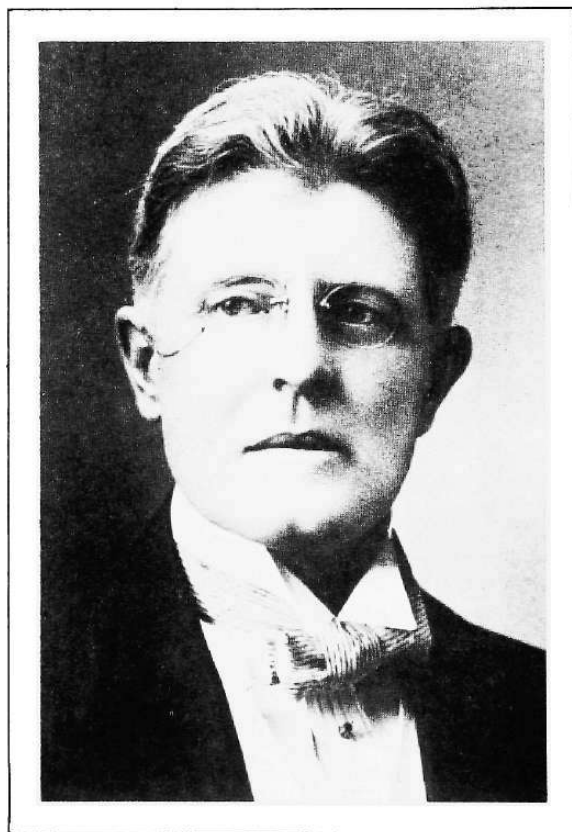
Wheeler's sleuthing led first to Two Harbors, where Roleff had lived, and then to Bloomington, where Fred J. Roleff, William's son, had moved. As a result of the historian's enthusiasm about the society's plans for the logging camp at Grand Rapids, the younger Roleff donated 94 of his father's glass negatives to the MHS audio-visual library. They included interior and exterior scenes of logging camps in the years from 1912 to 1916 and have been a bonanza indeed for the Forest History Center. Early in 1982 Fred Roleff gave the MHS 33 additional pictures taken by his father. These cover a wide range of subjects from ore boats and camping to blueberry picking, trout fishing, and family Christmases.

On January 27, 1982, Robert Wheeler interviewed Fred Roleff to learn more about his father and his remarkable photography. Wheeler distilled the following paragraphs from that interview.

WILLIAM ROLEFF was born on March 4, 1873, in Menomonie, Wisconsin, where his German-born parents had settled a few years earlier. Young William, the only boy in a family of six children, grew up on a large farm in the Menomonie area. His father, a descendant of landowners and innkeepers in Europe, also owned a saloon in the town.

During his youth, William was part of a three-man tumbling team, a group that caught the attention of the traveling Ringling Brothers' circus. Louise Morris Ringling (the wife of Albert Ringling), who was at that time the snake charmer of the entourage, persuaded Roleff and his two associates to join the troupe. William kept the circus connection a secret from his disapproving parents, who believed him to be practicing the trade of barbering. Family tradition says that when the older Roleffs learned of their son's clandestine circus activities, they burned his costumes. His active participation in the Ringling enterprise ended when Roleff was hurt during a rehearsal, but he maintained a strong interest in circuses all his life, an interest he fostered with a subscription to the theatrical and circus magazine, *Billboard*.

William T. Roleff MASTER PHOTOGRAPHER



Robert C. Wheeler

MHS COLLECTIONS



A FARRIER plies his trade, nailing winter shoes on one of the camp horses.

In 1898 Roleff moved to Two Harbors, where he met and married Josephine Therrien, the daughter of an early Lake County settler. The former circus performer worked as a barber, but his son recalls his mother telling him that whenever Roleff left the barbershop, "the first thing he would do was get out his camera and go out and take scenery."

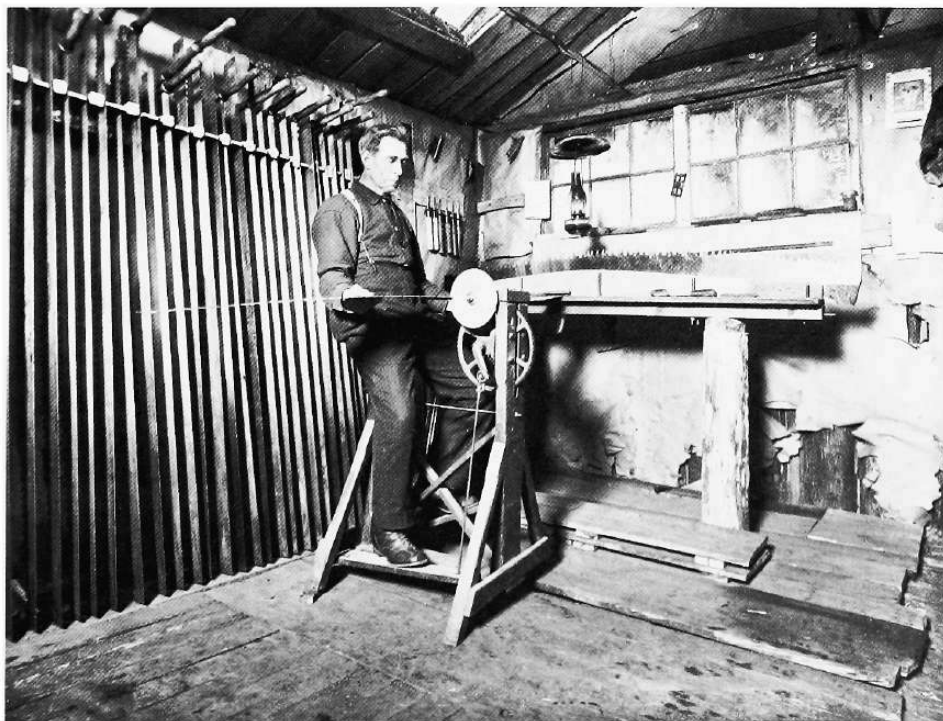
The budding photographer had always been interested in art, and the camera offered him a means of expressing himself. His first equipment was a Kodak folding camera, and with it he became well known in the Two Harbors area for his scenes of the countryside. Winter landscapes held a particular fascination for him and led to his numerous pictures of the logging industry. Roleff was acquainted with many railroad employees, and frequently he packed his photographic gear, took a toboggan, and boarded a caboose. The railroad men would stop wherever he wanted to get off, and Roleff would then make his way through the woods to various logging camps. At that time photography was still a novelty, and lumberjacks were enthusiastic customers for pictures of themselves and their fellow workers. It was their preference for a picture size of 6½ by 8½ inches that led Roleff to settle on that format.

About 1918 he opened a studio in Two Harbors for portrait and commercial photography. The venture apparently flourished, and Roleff would have left barbering and turned to photography full time had not the studio burned down and with it a great many of his pictures. But the quality of his work had become known, possibly from photographs he had taken for the Duluth and Iron Range and the Duluth, Missabe and Northern

railroads. The Defender Photographic Supply Company, a leading manufacturer of photographic materials in Rochester, New York, sought his services as a technical representative, and the *Duluth News Tribune* wanted him as a news photographer. Because of strong family and community ties, Roleff chose the newspaper. At the age of 51 he began a new career that lasted until 1942.

During his 18 years with the *News Tribune*, Roleff won national awards for his work with flash powder. And although he operated before the era of the exposure meter, he was called "One-shot Bill." His theory was that "if you take a picture you should be able to get it in one shot, and if you can't, you shouldn't be out there." He enjoyed the variety that newspaper work offered, and he delighted in the fact that it allowed him time for his own photography. His vacations were busman's holidays. The Arrowhead Association, a commercial club serving northeastern Minnesota, furnished him a car, expenses, and supplies, and Roleff would set out into wilderness areas to photograph lodges, resorts, camping and fishing scenes, or whatever the association wanted for promotional purposes. Frequently accompanied by one of his children, the photographer roamed the northern reaches of the state, canoeing to otherwise inaccessible areas, tenting and cooking outdoors, and recording the landscapes.

William Roleff retired from the Duluth newspaper at the age of 69 and died a year later in 1943. He passed on his skill and knowledge of photography to his son, Fred, and he left a legacy to history in the remarkable photographs that illuminate our understanding of the lumbering era at the beginning of this century.



A 1916 view of an Alger Smith Company camp in Lake County

A RACK of cross-cut saws line the wall behind the lumberjack shown using a pedal-driven sharpening wheel in 1914



LUMBERJACKS look on as one of the crew prepares to butcher hogs outside the cook shack of an N. B. Shank Company camp near Biwabik in 1913.

HUNGRY lumber camp workers pause for Roleff's camera as cooks wait to replenish plates and fill cups. This interior view illustrates the photographer's skill with flash-powder illumination.





A WINTER washday for lumberjacks at the Kileen Company camp in 1912



CRIBBAGE was one leisure-time activity at this Oliver Iron Mining camp in 1912.



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