

Reclaiming the Photographic Legacy of

MARLENE WISURI

From her perch 100 feet up, atop the burner of the Northern Lumber Company's lower mill, Octavie Morneau saw spread before her thousands of logs jammed in the St. Louis River, waiting to be processed through the lumber mills of the booming town of Cloquet.¹ The view included the huge mills with their stacks of cut lumber, a hillside of closely built homes, a thriving business district, schools, hotels, at least seven churches, civic buildings and, in the distance, the Northwest Paper Company. She focused her camera, released the shutter, and recorded the scene in a panoramic photograph that has preserved the moment for well over 100 years.

It is clear that the Morneau Art Studio was something more than just a place for photographing babies and brides. Arriving in Cloquet in 1901, Morneau opened her studio on Arch Street, and it quickly became a successful business venture. A glowing full-page description of it appears in *Cloquet, Home of the White Pine*, an illustrated compendium of business profiles published in 1907: "The character and quality of her pictures have been a constant source of surprise to her patrons."²

Octavie Morneau, probably a self-portrait, early 1900s



Octavie Morneau

In Cloquet, Morneau joined her older brother Edward Morneau, who was living there by 1895 and working as a laborer in one of the mills. He anglicized his name to Monroe, married, and through the years worked as a night watchman, saloonkeeper, and farmer. Ed Monroe and his family appear as subjects in a number of Morneau's photographs, and she was known as Aunt Tevie to his daughter and grandchildren.³

Octavie was born in 1867 or 1868 (sources differ) in St. Jean Port Joli, Quebec, one of at least nine children of Olivier Morneau Sr. and Zoé Gilbert (Jalbert) Morneau. The family left Canada for the United States in about 1880 and eventually settled in Dayton, Minnesota, a small town north of Anoka with a population of about 1,200 people. Zoé Morneau died in 1882 at the age of 49, leaving several young children. According to a relative, 15-year-old Octavie "was like a mother to the family, although she was young, too." Little is known of her early adulthood, although she must have learned the craft of photography during this time. *Home of the White Pine* reported, "She has been connected with the business for many years, so that skill and thoroughness have allied themselves with the sense of beauty, and true art and exquisite workmanship are joined to, and blended together, in the beautiful effects produced."⁴

Although institutions such as the Illinois School of Photography in Effingham existed at the time, many photographers, especially women,

simply learned their trade by working as an assistant or apprentice in an established studio. Might Morneau have learned her craft in the studio of Francois (Frank K.) Fournier, a French Canadian immigrant who settled in Dayton a few years before the Morneau family and operated his business there during Morneau's early-adult years?⁵ Lacking confirmed facts, we can only speculate.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, many women were drawn to photography, which offered them career options such as print finishers, retouchers and colorists, and camera operators. Some progressed to owning their own studios. Others worked with their photographer husbands or inherited a studio following the death of a spouse. For single women like Morneau, photography was a socially acceptable way to make a living, much like the traditionally female professions of school teaching, nursing, or secretarial work. For female entrepreneurs, photography joined the limited number of businesses, such as dressmaking and millinery shops, run by women.⁶

Photography, however, incorporated elements of science, art, and commerce that were often seen as male prerogatives. Yet Morneau was among a growing group of women working in the field, in Minnesota and nationally; photo historian Tracey Baker has documented more

than 60 women photographers in Minnesota between 1859 and 1900. Naomi Rosenblum's work shows that the number of professional women photographers grew from about 270 to 4,900—15 percent of all photographers in the United States—between 1880 and 1910. In 1905 the Illinois School of Photography estimated that about 35 percent of its 250 students per year were women; furthermore, "quite a number of our gentlemen students bring their wives with them and have them take up the work." The school especially encouraged women to study retouching, where "a woman's natural delicacy of touch" would be particularly valuable and potentially profitable.⁷

A studio could be established with a relatively small amount of capital. At the time Morneau opened her business in Cloquet, a modest set-up of a professional camera, tripod, and necessary chemicals and supplies could be purchased for less than 25 dollars.⁸ However, no other women owned galleries in Cloquet in the early 1900s, nor have any set up shop there in the years since.

Marlene Wisuri, who holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth in visual design, taught photography and photo history at several colleges and universities and served as director of the Carlton County Historical Society for 14 years. She has been co-author, photographer, or photo editor of books on immigration, Ojibwe history and culture, and local history.



Morneau surrounded by an assortment of portraits and photographic souvenirs in her Cloquet studio, early 1900s

Photographs of the interior of the Morneau Art Studio show a typical Victorian setting complete with ornate furniture, lavishly patterned wallpaper, and a profusion of ruffled pillows. “In her splendid reception room is to be seen an exhibit of photography so varied, so pleasing, and so beautiful as to rival the finest collections of the metropolitan galleries,” gushed *Home of the White Pine*. Although she was said to have made a specialty of children’s pictures, she often ventured out of the studio. Morneau recorded the newly built Northwest Paper Company with both interior and exterior photos. She took pictures of residents of the Fond du Lac Indian Reservation, school athletic teams, logging scenes, ditch banking (draining swamp-lands), and Cloquet’s Pinehurst Park. Her marketing efforts expanded her line beyond printed portraits: She also made photo buttons, pictorial pillowcases, and souvenir postcards. At least for her studio work, she would have photographed with a large-format view camera supported

by a tripod, producing dry glass-plate negatives. She developed and printed the images in her studio, where she was exposed to developer, fixer, and other potentially toxic chemicals.

Morneau’s studio photographs follow the conventions of the time, depicting children, bridal couples, men, and women often posed on

or with elaborate wicker furniture. Her studio was equipped with backdrops painted with classical scenes (also typical of the period) and an oft-appearing Turkish rug. However, some of her outdoor or out-of-studio photographs exhibit a more relaxed and informal atmosphere that catches the moment, while other images are strictly documentary in feeling. The surviving photographs are all technically competent, suggesting that Morneau had a good grasp of intricacies of exposure, developing, and printing.

Her biggest competitors in Cloquet were two young men who had also established photography studios. In 1902 E. D. Berg set up shop on the corner of Twelfth Street and Cloquet Avenue. Over the next several years, he took very competent, if predictable, studio photographs of the town’s residents. Examples of his work can be found in the collections of the Carlton County Historical Society in Cloquet, which also serves as a repository for many of Morneau’s images.⁹



*A snowstorm worth documenting: Arch Street, May 15, 1907.
The sidewalk sandwich board marks Morneau’s studio.*



Family gathering, early 1940s: Octavie and brothers Gabrial (or Gabriel) Morneau, Ed Monroe, and Peter Morneau.

Berg seems to have confined his photographic activities to the studio, unlike Morneau's other business rival, Olaf Olson. Olson was a Norwegian immigrant who began in photography as an amateur but had obtained training from the Illinois School of Photography by the time he opened his studio in about 1906. He later worked for a time as a staff photographer for the *Duluth News Tribune* and gained attention with his well-known coverage of the aftermath of the great forest fires of 1918. He also took one of the most graphic photographs of the 1920 lynching of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Issac McGhie in Duluth. Around 1923 he returned to studio work in Cloquet and throughout the 1920s and '30s took countless group photos of everything from kindergarten bands to members of a golf club. He also did extensive documentation of the area's businesses and industry in the post-fire years.¹⁰

Family lore holds that Morneau began to experience skin problems and brown spots on her hands from the chemicals involved in making photographs, and so she decided to leave Cloquet in 1916. The town's newspaper, the *Pine Knot*, related that she departed on May 10 after closing out her business two days earlier. Morneau, the paper said, "felt a real regret in leaving the town that had been her home so long and where she has so many friends. She also expressed her appreciation of the kindness and patronage that had been accorded her by our people." Her plans included traveling to Waukon, Minnesota, where she would join her brother Thomas Morneau. Together, they would visit the Twin Cities and after several weeks would "start for the west, making a leisurely trip to St. Paul, Oregon, where Miss Morneau expects to make her future home, and where they will arrive about

Sept. 1. They will make the trip by automobile." Octavie moved to Portland, Oregon, on August 10, 1918, noting the date in her Bible. The 1920 federal census lists her there: 51 years old, living alone in rented quarters, and working as a common laborer. Portland city directories for 1921 through 1926 show her at three different addresses but give no occupation.¹¹

Morneau returned to Minnesota in 1926 and settled in the west end of Duluth in the heart of the French Canadian community, where she lived in at least three boarding-houses until 1935. City directories indicate that she was again a photographer, but there is no sign that she owned a business. However, two photographers had studios within easy walking distance of her various residences: Ole T. Rosaas operated Rosaas Studio at 2102 West Second Street and advertised his specialty of wedding photography in the parish book of St. Jean-Baptiste, the so-called French Catholic church, where Morneau paid a pew rental of eight dollars in 1932. Portrait and wedding photographer Lars E. Westberg's studio was nearby at 2330 West Third Street. From this evidence, we can speculate that Morneau supported herself as a photographer in Duluth, but no photographs attributed directly to her have been found in public collections from this era. By 1930 she may have left the field again or taken on a second job, since that year's census lists her as a servant for a private family.¹²

After moving from Duluth in 1935, Morneau, now 68 years old, lived for several years with her



For biographical and historical information about Minnesota's commercial photographers and studios (mainly 1850–1920s), visit www.mnhs.org/people/photographers

brother Peter and his wife, Ida, in Mora. Peter owned a bakery and restaurant there and “had a big house on the lake by town.” It may be that those years were difficult for Octavie; it was known in the family that she had “some mental trouble.” Relatives report that a brother, sister, and nephew all suffered from “senility;” there may have been a family tendency for dementia. Her last year was spent in Fergus Falls State Hospital, where she died of endocarditis and anemia on February 24, 1944. Her funeral was held at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Mora, and she is

buried beside her parents in St. John the Baptist cemetery in Dayton.¹³

The photographic work of anyone recording life in early-twentieth-century small-town Minnesota is important to future generations, historians, and other scholars. Morneau’s photographs of the industrial scenes and city life in Cloquet in the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century become doubly important in light of the destruction of the city and many of its records in the devastating forest

fires of 1918. Her life story can be held up as an inspiring example of a single woman making her living as a businesswoman and a professional in a time when that path was the exception rather than the rule. She mastered, with skill and competence, a craft that required a combination of artistic sensibility and a good eye, scientific knowledge of chemistry and physics, an ability to deal with people, and business acumen. She takes her place as a little-known but important contributor to our collective knowledge of Minnesota history. □

Notes

The author thanks Barbara Sommer, who began research on Octavie Morneau many years ago; the Morneau relatives, including Rosemary Kobus, Gretchen Folsom, Michael Morneau, and Ronald Denardo, who shared information and recollections; and Anne Dugan and the staff of the Carlton County Historical Society.

1. Francis M. Carroll, *Crossroads in Time: A History of Carlton County, Minnesota* (Cloquet: Carlton Co. Historical Society, 1987), 328. Cloquet’s population grew from 3,000 in 1900 to more than 7,000 in 1910.

2. *Cloquet: Home of the White Pine* (Cloquet, 1907), n.p., reprinted in 1979 for the town’s Diamond Jubilee. This volume, containing descriptions of industries and civic establishments along with photographs and written sketches of many local businesses, is similar to many of today’s Chamber of Commerce booklets.

3. Minnesota, *Census*, 1895, and U.S., *Census*, 1900, 1910, *Population*—all for Cloquet/Knife Falls, www.ancestry.com (accessed Aug. 2, 2011); Rosemary Hebert Kobus (Octavie’s grandniece) to Barbara Sommer, Nov. 16, 1986, Carlton Co. Historical Society collection. Octavie’s name is sometimes rendered as Octavia.

4. *Census of Canada, 1871: Stanfold, Arthabaska, Quebec*, www.ancestry.com (accessed Aug. 2, 2011); Albert M. Goodrich, *History of Anoka County and the Towns of Champlin and Dayton in Hennepin County Minnesota* (Minneapolis: Hennepin Publishing Co., 1905), 176; Gretchen Morneau Folsom (Octavie’s niece) to Barbara Sommer, Dec. 6, 1986, Carlton Co. Historical Society.

5. Illinois School of Photography, *Annual Catalog, 1905–06*, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign library; U.S., *Census*, 1900, *Population*, Dayton Twp., Hennepin Co., www.ancestry.com (accessed Aug. 2, 2011); Minnesota Historical Society, *Directory of Minnesota Photographers*, www.mnhs.org/people/photographers (accessed Aug. 1, 2011).

6. Peter E. Palmquist, *Women Artists of the American West, Essays*, preface, Women in Photography Archive, www.cla.purdue.edu/waaw/palmquist/Essays.htm (accessed July 25, 2011). *Cloquet: Home of the White Pine* featured Morneau’s studio on a full page with two photographs. The only other profiles of businesses owned by women were three millinery shops.

7. Tracey Baker, “Nineteenth-Century Minnesota Women Photographers,” *Journal of the West* 28 (Jan. 1989): 15–23; Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), 59; Illinois School of Photography, *Annual Catalog*, 14, 31. Interestingly, *Census 2000: Survey of Photographers’ Business Practices* (MarkTill Consulting, Professional Photographers of America, 2001), 5, found that 30 percent of professional photographers were female. This figure may have increased markedly since then, given the digital revolution in photography.

8. *1902 Edition of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue* (New York: Bounty Books, 1969), 141–43; Joseph J. Schroeder Jr., ed., *1908 Sears, Roebuck & Co. Catalog No. 117* (Northfield, IL: Digest Books, 1969), 678–80.

9. *Cloquet*, n.p.

10. *Cloquet*, n.p.; *Pine Knot*, May 6, 1949, p. 7; *Cloquet City Directory, 1927–28*, 69 (Olson Art and Photo shop ad).

11. Folsom to Sommer; Kobus to Sommer, Feb. 7, 1990; Michael Morneau (Octavie’s great-nephew) telephone interview by author, Mar. 10, 2010, notes in Carlton Co. Historical Society and author’s possession; *Pine Knot*, May 12, 1916, p. 4; Bible inscription courtesy Rosemary Kobus; U.S., *Census*, 1920, *Population*, Portland City, www.ancestry.com (accessed Aug. 2, 2011); *Portland City Directory* for 1921–26.

12. See Polk’s *Duluth City Directory* for 1928–32 and 1934–35; *Parish Book* (Duluth: St. Jean-Baptiste Catholic Church, 1926) and *St. John-Baptiste Annual Messenger*, 1932, both at Holy Family Catholic Church, Duluth; U.S., *Census*, 1930, population schedules, Duluth City, precinct 48–50, enumeration district 69–69, sheet 12B, microfilm roll 1127, Minnesota Historical Society.

13. Kobus to Sommer, Nov. 16, 1986; Folsom to Sommer; Ronald Denardo (Octavie’s great-nephew), telephone interview by author, Mar. 12, 2010, notes in Carlton Co. Historical Society and author’s possession; State of Minnesota, death certificate #1944-MN-011086; *Kanabec County Times*, Mar. 2, 1944, p. 1.

The images on p. 268 and 271 are courtesy Rosemary Kobus; p. 279, bottom, is from the Minnesota Historical Society. All others are courtesy the Carlton County Historical Society, Cloquet.



*Edna and Beatrice, daughters of Theodore and Borghild Swenson,
about 1908. Children were said to be Morneau's specialty.*





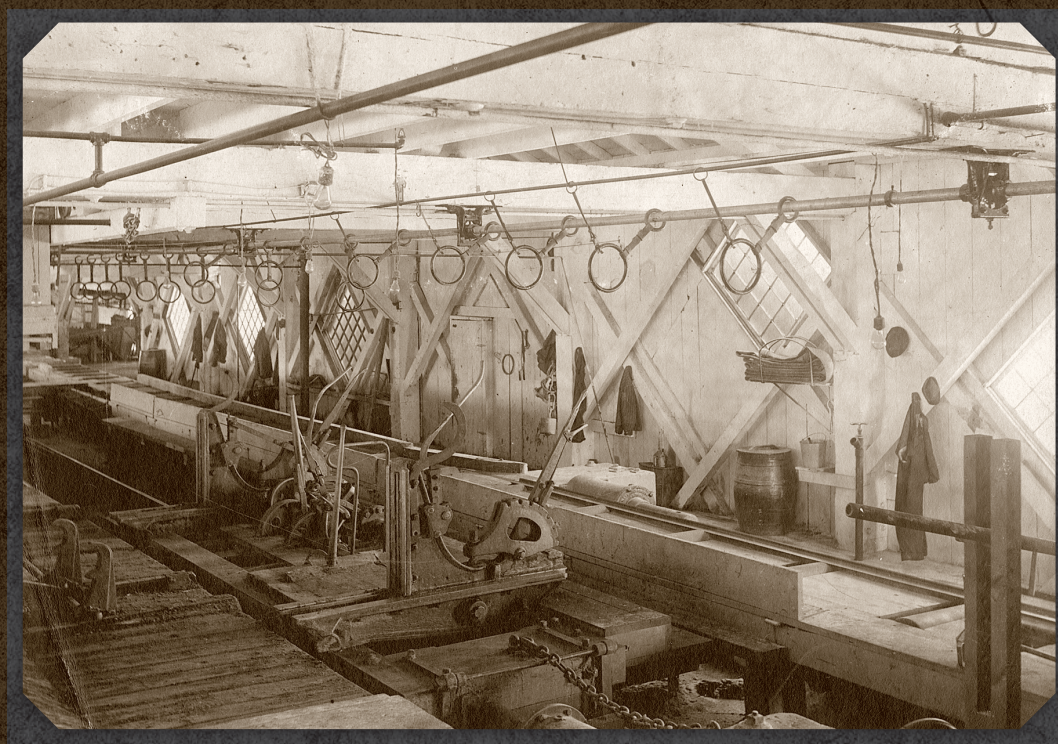
FACING PAGE: *Studio shot of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Petite (seated) and Joe Posey. Morneau photographed residents of Fond du Lac Reservation both in her studio and at their homes.*
ABOVE: *Bicycles in the studio, early 1900s. Octavie's brother Ed Monroe stands at right.*



ABOVE: *Priests and congregation of Holy Family Catholic Church, Fond du Lac Reservation.*
FACING PAGE, TOP: *Cloquet High School girls' basketball team, 1903. Girls' basketball was a popular sport in Carlton County in this era.* FACING PAGE, BOTTOM: *Cloquet City Band members.*







FACING PAGE, TOP: *West End business district, Cloquet, early 1900s.* FACING PAGE, BOTTOM: *Inside the Cloquet YMCA, 1907.* ABOVE: *Exterior and interior of the Northwest Paper Company, Cloquet, early 1900s.*



Ditch banking, Carlton County, early 1900s, used extensively to drain and convert swamplands to agricultural uses



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