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A Stereoscopic View of Colorado

by [Michael W. Harris](#) • January 30, 2015

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3D films may be the darling of Hollywood, but long before films began exhibiting pictures in the third dimension, stereoscopic photography was bringing the world of 3D images to homes beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Stereoscopic cards, also known as stereograms or stereographs, feature two nearly identical images side-by-side, one of which has a slight lateral shift to it. A person using a stereo card viewer, would insert the card at the far end and then look through dual prisms—set two and a half inches apart—to see a single image in 3D. This process uses a simple visual trick to make our brain interpret the dual images as a single, three dimensional photo.

Among the thousands of photographs included with Special Collections' purchase of the Ira Wolff Photographic History Collection is a large number of stereographs that feature pictures of natural disasters, architecture and people, and the beauty and wonder of nature. Mr. Wolff collected the work of notable photographers and producers of stereoscopic cards, but of particular interest to Coloradans is the series of stereographs produced by Byron H. Gurnsey called *Gurnsey's Rocky Mountain Views*.

Gurnsey was a nomadic photographer who first set up shop in Sioux City, Iowa, around 1865. While there he released a series of stereographs entitled *North Western Views*, very similar to his later Rocky Mountain series. In 1872 he moved

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to Colorado Springs and travelled around the Colorado Territory photographing the mining camps and railroads that brought new settlers to the region. From his studio on Pikes Peak Avenue in Colorado Springs, Gurnsey produced a series of more than 200 stereographs, of which CU holds one hundred. The series includes stereo views of “The Grand Cañon of the Arkansas,” the rock formations found in the Garden of the Gods, and “The Celebrated Soda Springs, at Manitou, Colorado.”

Many of these stereographs are part of a sub-series within *Gurnsey's Rocky Mountain Views* entitled *Scenes on the Line of the Denver & Rio Grande Railway*. Colorado Springs resident and Civil War veteran General William Jackson Palmer founded the D&RGR in 1870, intending it to be a railroad link between Denver and El Paso, Texas. The line, at its height, though, reached only as far south as Santa Fe, New Mexico. It did however become both an important route through the Rocky Mountains for transcontinental rail travel and the major link between Denver and Salt Lake City, Utah. It was later renamed the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RGWR) to reflect its westward expansion.

The history of the D&RGWR is found in another collection held in Special Collections: the library of the Paddock family of Boulder—former owners and long-time editors of the Boulder *Daily Camera* newspaper. The family arrived in Colorado in 1878 when Lucius C. Paddock moved here from Michigan. Lucius first worked as a reporter for the *Boulder News* and then founded his own newspaper, the *Sentinel*. After selling the *Sentinel*, Lucius worked as a reporter in Leadville and Aspen before he and his father-in-law purchased the *Daily Camera* in 1892. The family owned the paper until 1969, when it was sold to Ridder Publications, and a Paddock family member remained in the position of editor until Laurence T. Paddock retired in 1983. Within the Paddock library are two “tourists’ handbooks” that describe the route of the Denver & Rio Grande in 1903 and 1904. And tucked within a copy of Robert G. Athearn’s 1962 history of the D&RGWR, entitled *Rebel of the Rockies*, is a complementary ticket given to H.B. Millard, good for free rides for the entire year of 1907. At that time Millard was the Senate Representative for District 5 (Boulder County) in the Colorado General Assembly.

The *Rocky Mountain Views* of Gurnsey allow us a “view” into Colorado’s past. We can see what images people were interested in and how our state looked in the years before and after it achieved statehood. While the status of still-image stereoscopic imagery has fallen, the enduring attraction and desire for fully three-

in the chorus: a history of voting rights in America.



dimensional diversions, from 3D movies to fictional technology like *Star Trek's* holodeck, make them an important part of our history.



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