

“Being Ahead of Their Time Paid Off
From Franklin’s Past...Underwood & Underwood, Part II”
By John Mark Lambertson
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Their Royal Majesties had just returned to the palace from their coronation. The king was tired, and the queen was both fatigued and ill. Yet, they paused briefly for the handful of photographers carefully selected to record the historic moment.

Shutters clicked, but the queen swayed dizzily. Waved aside, the photographers had to quickly gather their tripods and retreat, uncertain of the quality of the photos.

As luck would have it, only one photographer was able to take a successful portrait that day of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandria of England in their coronation robes. That photographer was Bert Underwood, formerly of Ottawa, Kan.

Underwood and his brother, Elmer, had already made names for themselves as manufacturers and photographers of stereoptic views. Yet they were also pursuing the fields of portrait, commercial and news photography, and came to excel in all three.

As their fame spread, more and more doors opened for the brothers to do commissioned portraits. They photographed the kings and queens of England, Spain, Greece, and Sweden, the Czar of Russia, and the Emperor and Empress of Germany. They captured several Presidents of France on film as well as hundreds of photos of Presidents William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

Portraits were made of many of the world’s greats in art, literature, finance and science. Popes, senators, Indian maharajahs, heads of religious sects in the Holy Land, Arab sheiks, and African tribal chiefs all found themselves in front of Underwood and Underwood cameras.

Their commercial photography businesses, although less interesting, also was profitable. Especially noteworthy was their pioneering work in aviation photography, where they made engineering maps.

Yet perhaps the Underwoods’ greatest contribution to the history of photography was in the area of news photography.

Originally, newspapers and magazines illustrated with woodcuts if they illustrated at all. New technology, however, made photographs available to periodicals and the Underwood studio was among the first in the field of news photography.

The Underwoods had an advantage because their photographers were all over the globe, literally in the frontlines of world events. Their first news photographs were taken in the Greco-Turkish War in 1896.

Underwood and Underwood photographers also caught the action in the Spanish-American War, the Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion in China and many other engagements. They covered earthquakes, political events, shipwrecks, volcanic eruptions and explorations in the Arctic and Antarctic regions.

Before their deaths in the 1940s, Elmer and Bert Underwood had added a chapter to the history of photography. From their stereoptic views to photos of world leaders, to their pioneering work in commercial and news photography, the Underwoods left a rich legacy of images.

And it all began in a little frame building near the corner of Fifth and Mulberry in Ottawa, Kansas.

(The Franklin County Historical Society is in search of original furniture, equipment, calendars, etc., from the old Underwood and Underwood office in Ottawa. If you can help, please call 785-242-1232.)