

Tennis, tea and neck ties

VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

Tavistock and District Historical Society

I often wonder about the purpose of many of the photos in the Lemp Studio Collection, now housed at the Tavistock and District Historical Society. The five itinerant photographers (all male) who set up business periodically between 1873 and 1905, and John Lemp, who was Tavistock's longtime resident photographer from 1905 to about 1950, took innumerable pictures that leave us puzzled today as to why they were taken, and very often, there's no written record about the pictures.

This group photo is one example. Perhaps it's a tennis club with an introductory day for new members, or a social club, or a church activity, or a garden party with tennis and someone invited the local professional photographer. It's not a team, there's no apparent festivity or cultural event, there's no commercial appeal, yet the group is clearly posing for the photographer who arrived with his big camera, tripod, wooden negative holders (each as big as a medium size book) and his dark cloth to put over his head and focus on the subject upside-down through the rear of the camera. At this time, there were no mirrors and pentaprisms that flipped the image right-side-up as cameras started to do decades later. The inverted image made it especially difficult to see and control the composition.

Note how conscientious the unknown photographer was. He was visually aware enough and skilled in adjusting his camera to make sure there was comfortable space on all four sides of the group. The mouldings above the window and door on the upper floor of the porch were not cut off, adding some architectural details of this Second Empire-style home. All the eyes of the people but one are on the camera, which is difficult to do, especially with large groups. The edges of this photo have not been cropped, so you're seeing 100 per cent of the picture.

Compositionally it's a lovely, relaxed shot. Note how most of the men are wearing ties and jackets, everyone is buttoned up to the tops of their necks and no one's hair touches their collars. A man is holding a parasol on the right and the second man on the left, with a wide smile, is jokingly holding a hat above a friend's head like he's ready to trap an insect.

Technically, however, this photo has a problem; it's a very high-contrast image, so all the white areas are "burned out" and lacking detail. Consequently, the blacks are deep and rich and there are almost no grey areas. What happened?

Once the photo was taken, it had to go through multiple steps in a darkroom with liquid chemicals and one strong possibility is the negative spent too much time in the first chemical-developer. One characteristic of over-development is high contrast.

Another factor that creates high contrast is taking photos midday when there are no clouds. The very bright sun "burns out" anything white. There are no hard shadow edges in this picture, so it was an overcast day when it was taken, which helped to temper some contrast.

I learned this analogue method during the mid-1970s while attending Waterloo Oxford DSS where I was a yearbook photographer. One of the dressing rooms adjacent to the cafeteria was our darkroom where social sciences teacher John Buchanan taught fellow students and I the basics of darkroom and picture taking as an extra-curricular activity for the annual book. I turned this into my profession becoming a press photographer – thanks Mr. Buchanan – and while in photo college, assisted in the cataloguing of the almost 4,000 glass negatives that now comprise the Lemp Studio Collection. This, in turn, sparked my interest in antique photography. After my career as a press photographer, I taught grades 10, 11 and 12 analogue photography classes for the Peel Board of Education for 15 years. Then, along came digital technology, which closed my high school darkrooms and I instructed other courses.

Today, 130 years after this garden-party tennis group photo was taken, our cameras are so sophisticated that they automatically compensate for many of the technical difficulties of the past and have a variety of creative adjustments available to any photographer who has the time and patience to polish their pictures. Time and date stamps on our digital images are an innovation that will clearly be useful in the future so the "when" is taken care of but the "where," "why" and "who" in the picture are not. It's wise to make brief notes about these details because decades from now, it'll all be lost, creating innumerable questions for our ancestors, like this photo of a tennis social group on the front lawn of The Maples home.

If a reader has a copy of this picture or knows anything more about it, please contact me at the email below and let me know this new information. I'll pass it on to the Tavistock and District Historical Society.

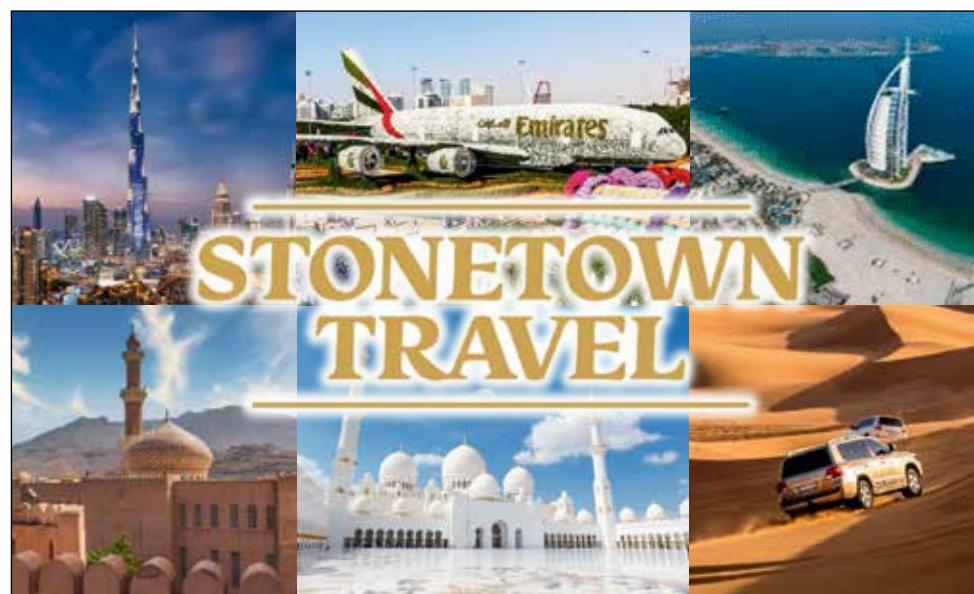
The answer to last week's history mystery: The question was, "What caused the collapse of the flax industry in Tavistock and district post-World War II?" with a photo of an aboriginal family of workers in their campsite. No one under age 19 answered the question correctly. The answer is: The introduction of petroleum-based products, which were more economical to produce than flax.

This week's history mystery: If a summer photo of a tennis group was taken outdoors today, what two items would many of the people probably be wearing that these people are not 120 years ago? You have to get the right combination of both items. This question is open to readers of all ages. Send your answer with your first and last name, the name of your community or rural route number to tim_mosher@hotmail.com. Whoever answers this correctly first will have this information published in the next edition.



(PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, LEMP STUDIO COLLECTION #0200.)

Twenty-nine people gathered for a leisurely time at The Maples, a grand home owned by local entrepreneur Fred Krug that, at one time, had a tennis court on its front lawn. Today, it's a retirement home with modern additions.



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Head Office:

150 Queen Street East, St. Marys, ON N4X 1B4

☎ 519-284-2332

✉ agent@stonetowntravel.com

TICO #50010159

Branch Office:

210 Mill Street, New Hamburg, ON N3A 1P9

☎ 226-333-9939

✉ newhamburg@stonetowntravel.com

TICO #50025796

www.stonetowntravel.com