Flatau’s Panama

Photography played an important part in documenting the history of Panama during the 19th and 20th Centuries. Today, much of this recorded history of the young nation can be found in the archives of private homes in the form of postcards. And when people familiar with Panama think of postcards, the name Flatau immediately pops into their minds.

It can be said that the art of photography in Panama dates back to 1860 with the arrival on the Isthmus of don Florencio Carlos Herbruger. He set up the first studio in Panama on “Calle de Mercedes” in the city of Panama, but by 1880 he had abandoned his trade for that of a successful entrepreneur becoming one of the most active businessmen in the country. Born in Kentucky, USA, in 1836, he died in Panama in 1932 (1).

Next to follow his footsteps was Timothy O’Sullivan, who arrived on the Isthmus in 1870 as the official photographer of the expedition led by U.S. Navy Commander Thomas O. Selfridge, Jr. On January 10, 1870, Commander Selfridge was ordered to lead an expedition on the survey of the Isthmus of Darien
for an interoceanic canal route. He was engaged in this work until 1874 and explored all the territory of Darien south to the headwaters of the Atrato River (2). During the first year of the expedition, O'Sullivan captured magnificent views of the “Isthmus of Darien”, which received high praises from the International audience. Many of his Isthmian photographs are found in the book “Timothy O'Sullivan, A Forgotten American Photographer” by James D. Horan (1).

Shortly afterwards, Edward James Muybridge, one of the great photographers of the times, came through Panama. During his two stops in the city in March and November of 1875 he took a series of photos still available. Some have been recently included in “Bits & Pieces – History of Panama” articles. The “Star & Herald” of March 21, 1876, promoted a pamphlet with a list of all the photos Muybridge had taken and noted where they could be purchased (1). The Muybridge photographs record a time when the economy of Panama was at a low point. Evidence of this can be seen in the many large stone buildings that appear abandoned, in disrepair or in ruins. No doubt some of the fires in the city were responsible for this forlorn appearance.


With the arrival of the French Canal Company around 1879, a new economic impetus began attracting, among others, photographers whose main intent was to record the construction of the canal. With them began the establishment of permanent local photography studios and we began to hear such names as Endara, Laurenza, Maduro, Durling Vila, Bennett, Masdeu, Campbell, Marin, Cedeño, Martini, Molina, Flatau, Wolf, Montufar, Finlayson, Narbona, Sosa, Stec, Montilla and many others who came after I left Panama.

There are two names that appear frequently when I do research on articles about my former country. One is Muybridge, whom I have already mentioned, and the other is John Fred Flatau, whose memorable postcards of Panama are treasures.

Flatau was born in Germany in 1899, arrived in Panama in January of 1930 and took Panamanian citizenship in 1940. With a passion for his new country, he took his photographic talents to new heights in the recording of Panama, its people and its customs, in thousands of beautiful postcards, creating a detailed and invaluable visual history of the nation in the second half of the 20th Century.

For forty years, John traveled the width and length of Panama capturing poetic images of its inherent beauty: the phosphorescent blue of the mountains; the clear aqueous green of its seas; the crystalline waters of its streams as they rush to the oceans; the tranquility of the valleys; the rich tints of the flowers and fauna; the glorious sunsets; the uniqueness of its cities, villages, towns, people and tribes; and so many scenes that we would otherwise never have seen. Every picture is a work of love and art. His style was new and unique to the industry and was soon in great demand for postcards, pamphlets and illustrated books. To put in perspective the valuable contribution of this magician with a camera we can count 20 million color postcards, one million Christmas Cards, 20 thousand black & white photos and hundreds of thousands of photos in brochures, pamphlets, books and periodicals (3).
"As a gold thread that ties together people, things, idealism and reality, in a permanent physical and spiritual equilibrium, the magnificent camera of John Fred Flatau narrates with objectivity the eternal dialogs of the mountains and the valleys, the rivers and their murmuring waterfalls, the trading hutches by the roads with the vegetables and fruit in season, the seas and the palm covered beaches, the waves crashing on the rocks in the purple hues of the sunsets; in the city its beautiful avenues with their palms, the residential neighborhoods and the ‘skyscrapers’, the crosses on the cathedrals and the needles pointing to the heavens of the Basilica Carmelita.” (3).

Flatau’s lens also captures the colorful countryside of the “interior” of Panama, recording with great care the folklore dances, the costumes and the character of the individual natives that inhabit the land. With his camera, he captured every corner of the country.

On Flatau’s retirement, Professor Eulogia R. De Arias gave a short speech regarding his contribution to history. She said, “It would be long to name every aspect of his art, which he carried out with a creative spirit rather than for personal gain . . . . his photography manifests his deep patriotic feelings, a constant desire to display the beauty . . . of Panama . . . .” (1).

But, let’s allow the photographs of Mr. Flatau tell the story . . .

*Left: Photo of the Basilica Carmelita with its “needles pointing to the heavens”, Federico Boyd Avenue and view of Bella Vista with the Bay of Panama in background. Right: Las Bovedas and Plaza de Francia with the old sea wall in the Casco Viejo section of Panama City.*

*Two additional views of Las Bovedas part of the sea wall with the older part of the city now known as El Casco Viejo.*
Left: Plaza de Francia at Las Bovedas. Right: Eighth Street, one of the narrowest in the old section of Panama, showing San Jose Church, in which the famous Golden Altar is located.

Left: Ruins of the Cathedral in Old Panama. It was destroyed by fire during the attack and sacking of the city by pirate Henry Morgan in 1671. Right: King’s Bridge in Old Panama, just outside the old city on the Las Cruces Trail leading to Cruces and then, either to Ft. San Lorenzo at the mouth of the Chagres River or to Nombre de Dios and, later, to Porto Bello.

El Valle in the late 1940s. Left, the Sleeping Indian Princes (La India Dormida). Right, the new Hotel Pan-American.
Left, a typical interior town street. Notice these houses have tile roofs, but the walls are made of composite mud and straw. Also note they painted only the front walls. Right, another example of a nice countryside home, with a palm roof this time.

On the left is a typical roadside stand selling fruits and vegetables while on the right we see a method of transporting chickens to the market.

Carnival is a time for fun and dressing up in colorful costumes; on the left is a town parade in the western provinces of Panama; on the right is a group of San Blas native women in full regalia.
The beaches of Panama are superbly captured by Flatau in these photos. The left photo is that of the Island of Taboga, covered in another Bits & Pieces article, while on the right we have a beach scene on one of the hundreds of islands in the Archipelago of San Blas.

This group of four photos captures the beauty of the Panamanian National Costumes as well as the happy spirit of the people as displayed during Carnival time. The Pollera (covered in another Bits & Pieces article) is beautifully designed and made and represents the more affluent Panamanian, while the Montuna, with the hat, is the one mostly worn by the people.
The Panama Canal and the Administration Building will always bring memories of the days of The Americans and the Canal Zone in which they lived and operated the famous waterway. Many Panamanians, including myself, attended schools there learning English and making life-long friends.

The flora of Panama is always beautiful and resplendent almost all year round. The red acacias are prominent features, as seen here in front of St. Mary's Church in Balboa, and the Holy Spirit orchid is the National Flower of Panama.

John Fred Flatau retired in 1970 and moved to the United States with his wife Ivimay.

Luis R. Celerier

Longview, Texas
December 2013

SOURCES
1. Epocas, April 1986
2. The Navy Department Library
3. Tierra y Dos Mares, Revista Panameña, No. 61, March-April 1972, Article by Eulogia R. de Arias.
NOTE

The daughter of John Fred and Ivimay Flatau, Betty Flatau Taylor, graduated from Balboa High School in 1954 and from Canal Zone Junior College in 1956. She worked at Gorgas Hospital for several months before marrying Carroll Taylor and moving to Lafayette, Louisiana. They are now retired and live in the Houston, Texas, area. By a great coincidence, Flatau’s granddaughter, Karen Taylor Glowczwski, lives in Hallsville, about 15 miles from Longview and owns a feed store about a mile from my home!

Betty Louise Flatau Taylor
BHS ‘54
Photo from 1954 Zonian yearbook,
http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00093678/00025/allvolumes2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

My thanks to Barbara Baldwin and Fred Sill for their help in editing.