



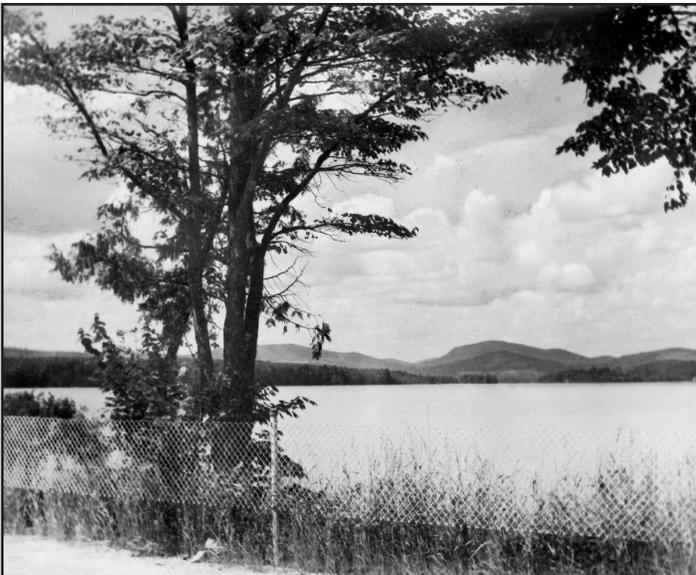
Norway, Maine Summer Festival, July 5-7, 2007



Minnie Libby of Norway Maine, 1863 - 1947 A Brief Biography

Minnie F. Libby, July 29, 1863 - April 18, 1947. Miss Libby, she was, born during the Civil War, still alive to see the end of World War II. Her 60-year career as a Norway business owner would have been notable in itself. But she was also a photographer and artist of some ability, with a share of eccentricities that were generally accepted, even appreciated, by her neighbors.

Her father, Hiram Libby, was a blacksmith who became a successful carriage maker and dealer. He was born in Naples, Maine, November 27, 1834. His father died when Hiram was 11, and his mother Susan Hall Libby moved with her five children to South Waterford, their residence in the 1850 census. In 1860 the family was in North Waterford, and consisted of Susan, Hiram and two sisters. Hiram, then 24, is listed as a blacksmith.



Minnie's treatment of a classic local scene, looking northward up Penesseewassee towards Noyes Mt. from what is now Route 117.

According to Hiram's obituary he learned his trade at Samuel A. Miller's foundry in South Waterford, a plausible connection since there were both a foundry and a carriage shop there at that time. He married Margaret S. Kimball of

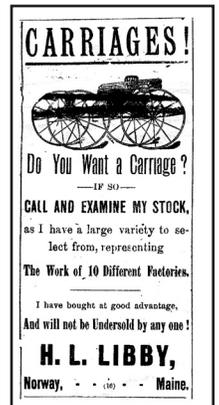
Waterford (January 16, 1836 - January 22, 1914) on May 1, 1862, and Minnie was born about a year later, July 29, 1863. Her birth location has usually been listed as Waterford; but there is at least one record that suggests she was born in Portland.

Hiram's obituary lists time in Boston, a year in Iowa, and stints in Portland and Bryant Pond, which total an improbable number of years and may be assumed to be the result of confusion. In fact the 1870 census finds him in Woodstock, and listed as a carriage manufacturer. The history of Woodstock unravels the confusion a bit, saying that he "came here from Portland and was in the carriage business with Joseph Whitman.... He returned to Portland, and came thence to Norway." The obituary says that in Portland he worked for Joseph Russell, and that he came to Norway in 1878.

If we combine this information with the Woodstock account, we have him in Waterford in 1860, perhaps in Portland after his marriage for a while, then in Woodstock before and after 1870, then another stint in Portland before he settled down in Norway. We go through this exercise partly to try to confirm the history, and partly to get some insight on Minnie's childhood.

In the 1880 census the family is in Norway, Minnie now sixteen and listed as "artist." This is two years after the move to Norway, apparently from Portland. Information about Minnie's early education is lacking; but it is clear enough that even at sixteen she was showing a commitment to art, and we may suggest that the family's time in Portland could have had some influence.

The 1870's was a good time for art in Portland. Well-known Maine artists like Harrison Bird Brown (1831-1915) and D. D. Coombs (1850-1938) were in the midst of their careers; the Portland Museum of Art would be founded in 1882. If the young Minnie had a proclivity for art, she was in a good place to nurture it, and must have enjoyed her time in Portland.



Hiram Libby 1894. Note his claim "the work of ten different factories."

What is more interesting is the support we see from her family, especially her father. Hiram seems to have been an artisan, then a businessman. But we find him supporting a daughter who identifies herself as an artist at age 16, and whom Hiram then sends to study at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. We may speculate that Minnie being the Libbys' only child may have had an influence on the relationship.

The exact trajectory of her studies remains uncertain. One report says that she studied photography; another that she won an award for her work. It appears likely that she developed an interest in photography during the Boston sojourn, and is reported to have worked as a retoucher for a photographic firm there.

The story then has her returning to Norway and continuing her retouching work with J.U.P. Burnham, one of the photographers at the Anthony Crockett Picture Studio, located on the Main Street site where the Norway National Bank was later built. A set of unsigned notes on Minnie in the possession of the Norway Historical Society says that this was in 1882.

The Crockett establishment was one of a series of photographic studios in Norway. Perhaps because a space specially designed for good natural lighting was important to photographers before good electric illumination was available, such buildings tended to pass from photographer to photographer. Let us digress a bit and summarize some history:

According to the NHS document, the Crockett building was moved back from Main Street, so that it fronted on Cottage Street. It was then sold to photographers Jack Swan and George Stone. After a fire damaged the building it was remodeled by Clarence Pike, who ran it with Jack Swan.

Swan moved to Canada, and Frank Bartlett became Pike's new partner. Bartlett died during the Spanish-American War, and Pike continued alone for a while, then rented the place to Wiggin Merrill; Pike then moved to Massachu-



The Deering Street building when Akers lived there.

setts and opened a photography studio there.

Miss Libby joined this revolving cast of characters in 1885, according to most sources. Again we see her father's support; when she was ready to start her business, Hiram constructed a building for her on the west side of Deering Street (the family, and Hiram's business, were located a few

blocks away, at Deering and Pearl Streets).

Minnie's business was successful, and she was well established by the 1890's. Perhaps to provide her with a better facility, in the fall of 1903 Hiram stepped in again. He bought the former Crockett/Swan/Pike studio, then being rented by Wiggin Merrill. Pike, now in Massachusetts, did



The Cottage Street building ca. 1950. Note northlight in rear, for daylight illumination before electricity.

not bother to inform Merrill of the sale.

The disgruntled Merrill placed an ad in the Advertiser headed "REMOVAL NOTICE," effectively accusing the Libbys of underhanded tactics and announcing a move to Main Street. After a repeat of Merrill's ad, Minnie responded, briefly and acerbically: "THIS SPACE will be used by Miss Libby to advertise her photographic business and not to make misleading statements about her competitors."

So Minnie was now more or less back where she started. Next, Hiram sold the Deering Street building to a man named Dyer, for a lunchroom. Dyer then sold it to none other than Wiggin Merrill, leaving Minnie and Merrill ensconced in each other's former studios.

Completing the complex series of connections, Merrill sold the building and the business in 1914, to Vivian Akers, who had been a model for Minnie's photos as a child. Akers ran the photography business until about 1929, but used the building as his art studio and residence, and spent the rest of his life there.

After the death of her mother in 1912 Minnie moved out of the family home. The NHS document says that she boarded nearby, and this likely remained her mode, since she seems never to have owned a house. By the 1940's, near the end of her life, she had moved to the Cottage Studio, sleeping on a cot, with a minimum of domestic arrangements.

The whole story makes an interesting saga to say the least, extending over decades as it does, with a cast of characters that included all of the most successful photographers in Norway.

We return to Minnie's early career. It seems likely that the Deering Street studio was constructed in 1885, in time for her to open the business for the Christmas season. The first advertising we find comes at the beginning of December

1885, in a display ad in the Advertiser:

"Miss Libby, the photographer, is ready for the holiday trade at her new studio with new scenery and accessories and will give special attention to artistic posing and fine finish in cards, cabinets and panels. Enlargements in crayon, ink, or on albumen from 10X8 to life size can be finely finished here as in the city. Studio Deering Street opposite Norway Hall."

So here is Minnie, already "Miss Libby," a title of formality and respect that she must surely have adopted consciously and which she handled almost as a brand name, offering the standard and special products and services of better photographers of her day.

What she had for sale is not what we expect from photographers these days, and deserves some explanation. At this time a photographer's basic products were fairly well standardized. A customer could get, as Minnie says, "cards, cabinets, and panels." "Cards" were "cartes de visite," a full-length photograph $2\frac{1}{4}'' \times 3\frac{1}{2}''$ mounted on heavy cardstock $2\frac{1}{2}'' \times 4''$. "Cabinets" were "cabinet cards," similarly standardized at $5\frac{1}{2}'' \times 4''$ for the photograph, mounted on a card $6\frac{1}{2}'' \times 4\frac{1}{4}''$; and the "panel" was a large photograph for the wall, in a $13'' \times 8''$ mount.

This standardization of photographic products was part of the growth of portrait photography as an industry around 1860. Inventions like the carte de visite and specialized equipment to produce them led to explosive growth. One history of photography notes that in 1851 there were a dozen portrait studios in London; by 1866 there were nearly 300. Special carte de visite cameras could produce multiple images quickly, and the small photos came to be used as business cards. Cabinet cards continued to be popular into the twentieth century. College students traded and collected them, and festooned their walls with strings of their classmates' photos.

Minnie's experience as a retoucher also shows in her advertising. Alteration of various kinds was routine in the photography business at this time. It is no accident that Minnie was able to get a job doing retouching when she was in Boston, nor was it surprising that she could come home and move right into the Crockett studio.

Here is a quote from a history of photography, talking



A carte de visite from about 1890 (not by Minnie); note careful use of props and backdrop, and the photographer's success in posing the child.

about the prevalence of manipulating photographs: "In the late 1850's retouching and 'beautifying' were carried to such extremes that some photographic societies banned coloured photographs altogether from their exhibitions and in the case of touched-up photographs often stipulated that the negative should be exhibited alongside the print.

"The colorist", ran one instruction, 'may correct with his brush defects which, if allowed to remain, spoil any picture....'" The retoucher was urged to adjust the photograph to make his sitter's features conform to Victorian ideals of beauty. For a woman: "The nose slightly prominent in the centre,...small, full, projecting lips...chin round and small...."

It is unlikely Minnie went so far, if only because she was a thoroughly independent woman without much interest in style. What she was doing, however, was another sort of enhancement, "Enlargements in crayon, ink, or on albumen



EXPECTATION

Is always more than realized here. Careful study and long experience has taught us all the points about Photographic work that are necessary to produce the best pictures.

We can almost tell at a glance which pose is best suited to you. We are also

Very Careful

about all the little details in clothes, etc., which often spoil pictures.

It is evident that we are taking great pains to please every one who favors us with their patronage.

THE COTTAGE STUDIO,
Norway, Me.

From the Norway Advertiser 1904, drawing almost certainly by Minnie

from 10X8 to life size."

First of all, she must have had an enlarger available when

she opened. This would likely have been an apparatus that operated horizontally, not vertically like contemporary enlargers. It was able to make large prints. When she says “life size” she means it; Victorian family portraits in elaborate frames could be three feet or so square, Grandfather and Grandmother still dominating the parlor decades after their deaths.

“Albumen” refers to albumen photographic printing paper, which was one of a number of popular processes for printing photographs at that time. The albumen came from egg yolks, and produced a glossy print at a time when other printing processes were unable to do so. The manufacture required fresh eggs, up to a half million a year for one London factory at a time when the popularity of the product was at its height.

Minnie’s reference to crayon and ink, on the other hand, is promoting her ability to enhance photographic prints artistically. This was typically done with pastels, charcoal and ink for the large portrait photos. The result was “artistic” to varying degrees, depending upon how much hand work was applied to the photographic print. With extensive enhancement, a photographic portrait could look almost like a pastel drawing.

We devote some space to Minnie’s early career because it helps to understand the historical context of her professional choice, and at the same time illuminates some of the history of photography in the Norway area.

It also seems clear that she had a firm grasp on the business side of her profession from the beginning, an important factor in running such an enterprise for half a century. One suspects that she both inherited and learned basic business skills

from her father, whose years in the carriage business must have left him with few illusions about the requirements of commerce.

So Minnie was prepared to meet the basic requirements of the market when she opened. Her artistic side as it applied to photography in that time also shows in her early work. First, we see her advertising that she has “new scenery and accessories and will give special attention to artistic posing.” This was important to ordinary customers, since portraits were usually enhanced by appropriate accessories and poses.

Second, we see the basis for far more elaborate photographs. As photography had developed in the 1850’s, its practitioners began to see it as more than simple reproduction of reality: “This new land is photography, Art’s youngest and fairest child, ... heir to a new heaven and a new earth....” And the way to raise the new art to its deserved place was to demonstrate that it could address lofty subjects as well as paintings could.

Thus there arose a movement that produced photographs planned after the lofty painted subjects of the day, using contrived scenery, elaborate costumes, and clever techniques with multiple negatives.

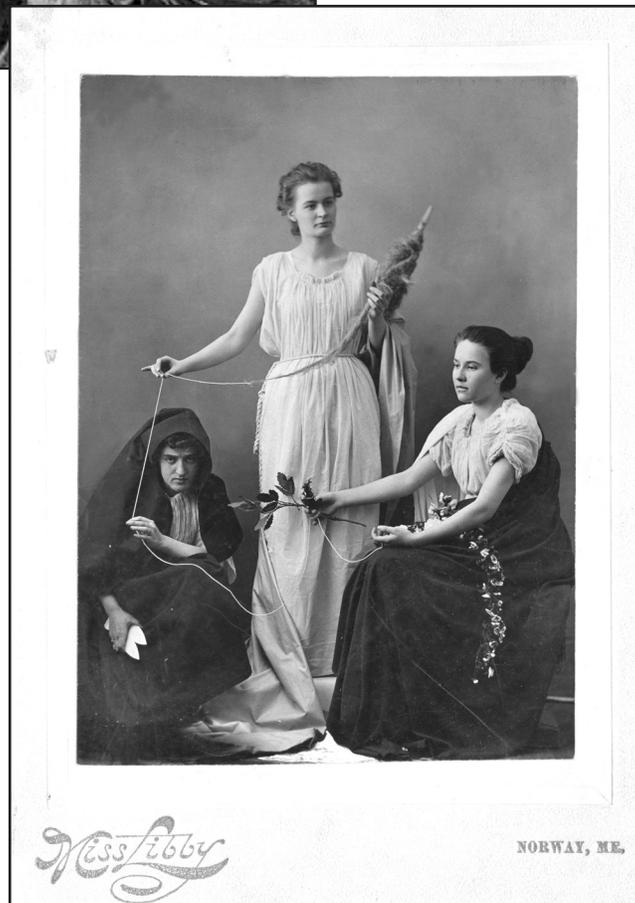
Minnie absorbed this fashion, perhaps as much because it amused her as because it produced “artistic” photos. It is difficult to assign dates to this work of Minnie’s beyond saying that the extant photos seem to date from around 1900, based mostly on the evidence of the ages and identities of her models.

her models.

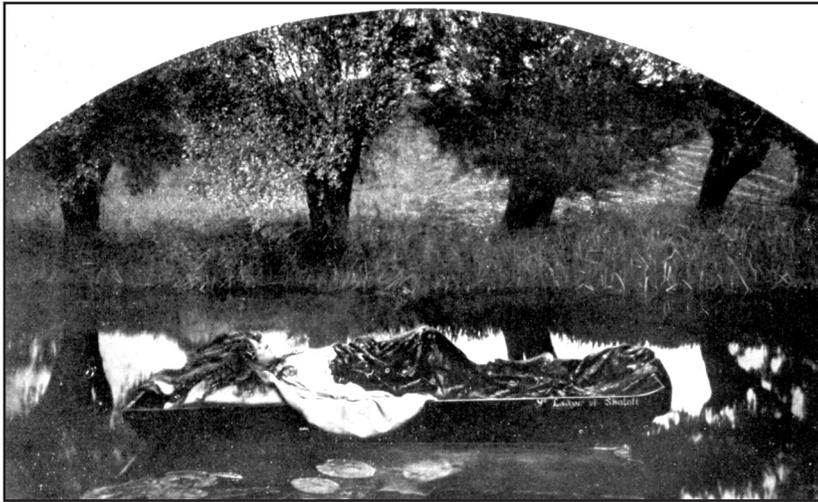
These people were neighbors in Norway, who were of course the only models readily available. We do not have testimony from any of these people, but it must have been fun, even interesting, to get dressed up in costume and pose.

The effort Minnie made with these photographs shows in the cabinet card reproduced on the left (which also exists as a large framed print enhanced with chalk and ink). We show the card on which the photo is mounted, with Minnie’s logo imprinted on it, typical of cabinet cards.

A note on the photo identifies the central figure as Fannie Cullinan; we do not know the others. The image is of the Three Fates, from Greek mythology. Fannie is Clotho, who spins the thread of life; to her left is Lachesis, who measures it; and to her right is Atropos, who cuts it.



An Internet search yields the painting next to Minnie's photo, by an unidentified artist, the model for Minnie's pho-



Henry Peach Robinson, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1861.

tograph right down to the hand positions and the clippers held by Atropos. What she was doing in Norway was precisely what had been going on elsewhere before and during the time she was in Boston. And she clearly knew well what to do with the materials at hand in Norway; examine the detail of the scene and consider the effort that went into creating it.

Above we reproduce a photograph by Henry Peach Robinson, an English photographer and one of the leaders of this "High Art" movement. It illustrates Tennyson, is made with multiple negatives, and displays the same painstaking detail that Minnie shows in her cabinet card.

Much later, when Minnie's work was featured in *Life* magazine, these posed scenes and the friends who populated them were part of the story. Of special interest is Minnie's use of Vivian Akers in some of these photos. On the left is one



of her scenes, with Vivian and Charlotte Moore posed against a backdrop, Vivian dressed as some kind of prince, quite elaborately.

Akers was born in 1886, so to judge from his apparent age the photo dates from the 1890's. While we do not know in detail of his relationship with Minnie, it seems safe to assume

that his attraction to photography (he was already attracted to art beginning at age 6 or so) goes back to his early years hanging around Miss Libby's studio on Deering Street.

As to the original connection, both Miss Libby and the Akers' attended the Universalist Church, as did many of the leading citizens of Norway like the Freeland Howe family, and we may suggest that the friendship began at church.

We do know that Akers was taking pictures by about 1905, when he did nature photography as a member of George Howe's Boy Scientists. Later he talks about working for a local photographer, but does not mention the name, though it is likely that either it was Minnie or Wiggin Merrill.

We are short of images of Minnie herself during this early period; indeed, she always seems to have spent more time behind the camera than in front of it, not surprisingly. There is one image of her, how-



ever, that may well date from about 1900, when she was 37.

In it we see her in profile, carefully lighted from the front, sitting in a chair reading. We may take it to be a photo that she arranged, taken perhaps with a self-timer on the camera. She has used daylight to highlight the back of the chair and her profile, against a dark background of curtain.

To the left in the photo, in front of her, we see a bright background that contrasts with the dark curtains and calls attention to her figure. The out-of-focus background also contrasts with the sharp focus on Minnie's figure to give a sense of depth to the photograph.

She already shows some of the tight-lipped sternness that we see in later photos, a woman who was her own person and took an uncompromising view of the world.

Below is another photo of Minnie, a cabinet card showing its age, taken perhaps before 1900 some time, in a booth, indoors somewhere (note the polished wood floor). It is quite an elaborate construction, with drapes and festoons. The two posts that hold up the canopy sport garlands of flowers.



She has for sale quite a range of pieces, from large paintings to smaller photos; no doubt she was also taking orders for portraits to be done later at the studio.

Note that the cabinet card places her in Harrison as well as Norway. We have so far found no record of a Harrison studio, but she was almost certainly like other photographers, who would set up shop for a week or so, advertise in advance, and pick up a good piece of business in Harrison or South Paris or other towns at a distance from their normal place of business.

The period from about 1890 until 1910 seems to have been a time when Minnie worked hard at her business. We see this in a couple of ways. First, there was the move to the new studio, a time when she ran display ads regularly in the Advertiser (and we may also speculate that the pub-

lic controversy with Wiggin Merrill at least gave her some publicity).

Special offers were common, including package deals for birthdays. For her official opening in January she said:

MISS LIBBY

will open the Cottage Studio Jan. 1.

With a splendid FREE OFFER of an OXFORD PANEL or a PARIS PORTRAIT with every dozen \$3.00 cabinets. Some fine samples of these large photos will be on exhibition.

She promoted roll film, now available to amateur photographers; she advertised for amateur photographers in surrounding towns "to do a little work for us." It seems clear that the move to the new studio had energized Minnie, at least in terms of promoting new business.

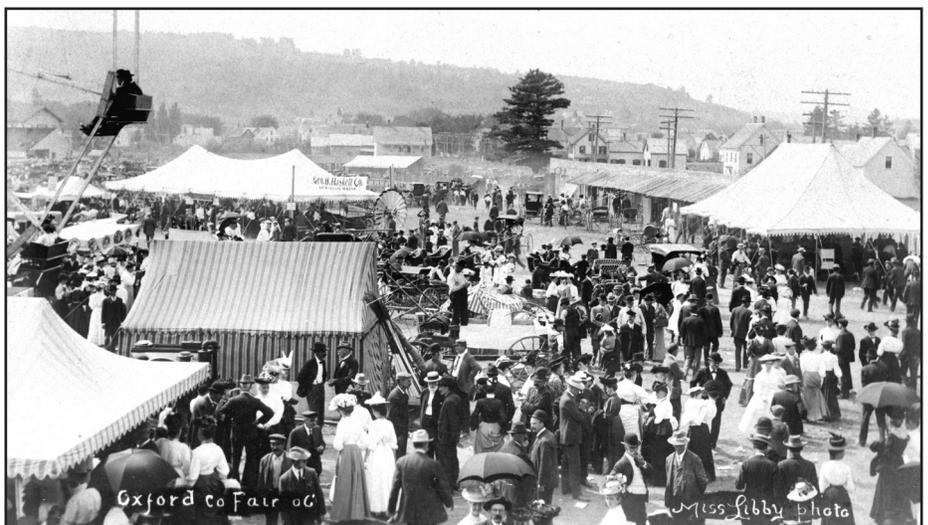
This was also the period when Minnie sold aggressively at the Oxford County Fair. Dozens of postcards of the fair are extant; the Norway Historical Society alone has 16 different cards. Between about 1900 and 1920 postcards became an extremely popular means of communication. They offered attractive graphics on one side, space for a short message on the other, and postage of only a penny.

Mail service was good, in part because of the growth of the Railway Mail Service. A husband headed home could mail a postcard in Portland, and by the time he got home to Norway the next day the card would have arrived and the family would be waiting for him.

Minnie's fair photos were taken and printed immediately on postcards preprinted on the back, with a photo emulsion on the front

Below is a 1906 Fair postcard from Minnie showing the jumble of booths on the fairgrounds, the large crowd and a bit of a very tall Ferris wheel. We are looking west, with Paris Street on the right. Note that the photo is taken from above; many of Minnie's fair shots look like they were taken from the building that is now the Community College.

By about 1910 photographers had abandoned the imitation

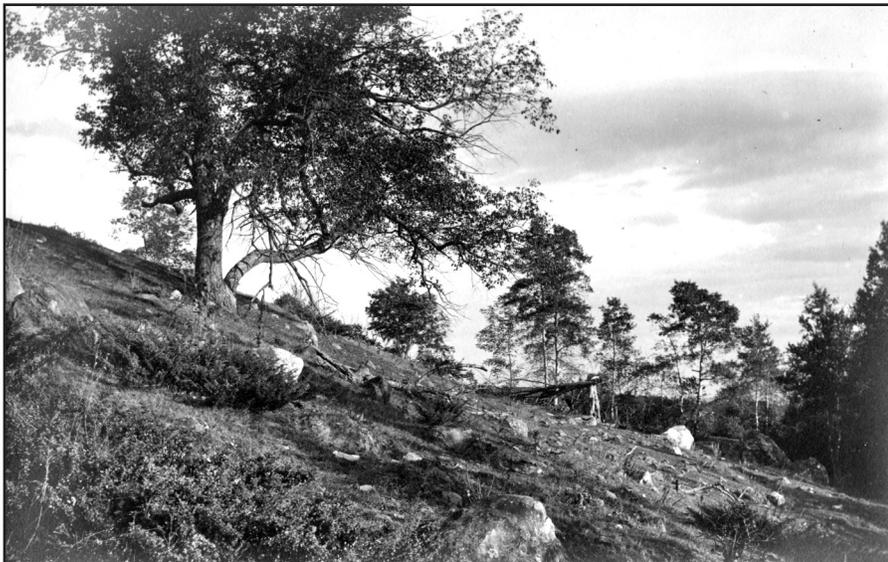


of painters and moved on to more purely photographic images, following the aesthetic of Edward Steichen and others. Minnie's postcards reflect this trend, which might have been new but was nonetheless formalistic in its own way, featuring darkly atmospheric images like a single gnarled tree on a ledgy hillside.

Norway and environs provided ample appropriate scenery. Below is a postcard (undated) labelled "Hebron Pasture," appropriately rocky and with a single lone tree, the angle of view always uphill toward the tree. Minnie continued to be aware of major trends in the photographic arts, in spite of relative isolation.

We know that by the 1920's Minnie had a couple of employees, and she must have had help well before then, considering the many fair postcards and jobs like the cabinet cards by the dozen she advertised. About 1930 she hired Eugene Robinson, always called "Bobby," who became a fixture at the Cottage Studio along with his wife Rose.

Their daughter Mione remembers Bobby being sent out to take photographs, and both parents busy in the darkroom developing and printing. Mione worked a few summers for Minnie, picking up films for development from the two drugstores in Norway and the like.



Bobby's appearance was the signal for some modernization at the studio, which must have been needed by this time. The October 3, 1930 edition of the Advertiser includes the following note: "Miss Libby is making sweeping changes at her studio.... New work rooms for summer and winter will contain...a developing and printing machine designed and constructed by 'Bobby' Robinson. The skylight...has been abandoned for the Holldorson lighting system of 5,000 candle power. A supplementary cabinet to direct 800 candle power as needed is being developed by 'Bobby,' the all-

round assistant. Heretofore much of the labor has been done on the second floor and basement, but the new plan centralizes business for efficiency and comfort." Robinson's inge-



nuity is lost, unfortunately; it would be most interesting to see what he built.

Besides the ongoing developing and printing business for amateurs, Minnie had commercial clients. She did extensive photography when Longley's remodeled, and sent Bobby off to do publicity photos for childrens' camps in the area.

She continued to produce items for general sale. Above is a Christmas postcard, a richly textured snow scene perhaps around Pennessewassee, typical of a series of holiday cards Minnie produced.

As we have said, Minnie did not seek notoriety, even locally. She apparently sold some photos to publications outside the area, and there is a story of her exhibiting in Boston and winning a prize, though without a date or other documentation.

Her one memorable brush with fame came in an odd way, in 1940. Life magazine, then at its height as a photographic record of American life, had a section called "Speaking of Pictures," which ran near the front of the magazine and featured unusual or amusing photographs. The magazine had working for it at that time Hansel Mieth and Otto

Hagel, a German couple, excellent photographers, who had fled Germany in the early 30's. They are best known for the photographs of the Depression; Hansel (who this as her professional name) was and is especially notable.

Somehow, in the course of their search for stories in the hinterlands, they happened upon Norway and Miss Libby. Inevitably, they were fascinated, and managed to get access to a number of Minnie's early photos, which they matched with current shots. To the right we see Minnie, clad as usual in knickers, suit coat and flowing tie, with her 8x10 view

camera, said to be an Anthony and Scoville (the company formed in 1901, which dates the camera to about the time Minnie bought the Cottage Studio). Her subjects are George (left) and Freeland (right) Howe. Hansel and Otto had also been able to get a print of Miss Libby's portrait of the brothers taken in 1888, along with similar pairs for Vivian Akers, Ed Cummings and others.



“Norway’s swellest dudes” was the caption for the shots of the Howes, the 1888 dandies now looking much milder than they really were; one wonders if Minnie actually took the photo she seems to have posed.

The other feature of the Life article was Minnie’s early posed scenes, with samples of Akers, Cummings and Herbert Hosmer at earlier ages. The visitors took special note of “The Rescue,” which we see to the right here., which they say won a prize in Boston (though we have no documentation to fill out the story).

The Life photo omits the pedestal the man is standing on, presumably intended to make the pair look like a statue. According to an Advertiser story, the models are John Henry Millett and Fannie Cullinan, née Cummings, who were playing characters in a poem called “The Captain and His Daughter.”



We are told that Miss Libby was not particularly happy with the article when it was printed. This is not surprising; Minnie took herself seriously, and though the article spoke well of her, the flavor of a sideshow novelty must have remained for her, especially in view of where the article was carried. We do not know how Hansel and Otto described what they were doing, but if Minnie understood that she was being visited by nationally famous photographers then she must have been flattered, even if she disapproved of the result.



We must turn now to Minnie’s work as a painter, which goes back to her original art interests, and may be assumed to be the motivation that led her to study in Boston. It seems clear that she continued her painting alongside her photography all her life; and of course the two merged as she worked at retouching and enhancing her photos, tasks where her

art training was essential.

Although she sold paintings - a magnified look at the booth display in the photo on page 5 reveals quite a number of paintings on display - she seems to have regarded that side of her art as more a sideline than a part of her business. One magazine article talks about her going on painting expeditions with Vivian Akers (though we know of no documentation of this from Vivian), and feeling that her work was inferior to his. To add to the difficulty of judging her work, she did not always sign or date paintings.

That she was clever at combining her skills in interesting ways shows from an *Advertiser* article (year unknown, possibly 1930’s): “Miss M.F. Libbey...is giving considerable attention this season to oil studies of flowers.

“Miss Libbey, who has been a local photographer here for years, has led up to her present work by field studies, especially last year.

“Miss Libby is utilizing her water-lilies in oil for glass-covered trays, for which they are particularly well adapted; and her other flower-paintings for ordinary framing and wall decoration. One of her latest and best pieces is a study of golden-rod hanging over an old corner-fence; which is much admired. She has chosen this departure from the ordinary water-coloring of photographs; and likes the results.”

The writer sees Minnie’s oil paintings as an alternative to tinted photographs, a comparison that most of us would see as trying to equate two separate media. One may see here a glimpse of a different way of looking at art, both paintings and photographs as “ordinary... wall decoration.”

In fact Minnie's painting, especially of still lifes, was something very different from her tinting of photographs. Here is a close-up of a still life of zinnias, from 1935, oil on masonite (painting on panels was very popular and well accepted in the late 19th and first half of the 20th century).

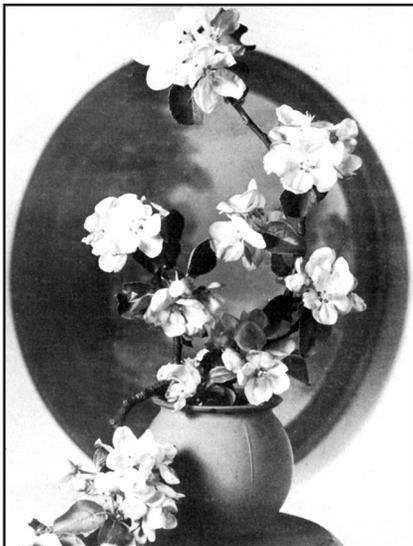


Even in the monochrome reproduction it is possible to see her vigorous brushwork and generous laying-on of paint as she works to

capture the texture of the multi-petaled flowers.

Minnie did still lifes regularly, both photographically and in paintings. Partly this may go back again to her early conditioning; besides the Classical and literary scenes the High Art photographers emulated, they worked to replicate classic still life paintings..

A magazine article in *Down East* from May of 1976 (author unknown) reprints a number of Minnie's still life photographs, including the carefully composed picture of apple blossoms in a vase to the left.



Minnie was equally competent at landscapes. Here is a painted version of the lonely tree/rocks/hill composition Minnie also produced in photographs. Seen in color the painting has the feel of Vivian Akers' Impressionist style, with a fairly rich palette of bright shades and highlights. There is also a feel of

Akers' brushwork in the picture. We have enlarged a portion of the pine tree in hopes of showing the brushwork, small strokes of strong color.

In the full composition the tree shows its dark trunk, and

the foliage is highlighted with strokes of green, white and reddish brown, working toward the sense of light characteristic of the Impressionists.

Akers was at the Art Students League in New York around 1906, and at some point later became friendly with John Enneking (1841-1916), the eminent American Impressionist who summered in Newry and later in Greenwood. Akers was unequivocal in his admiration for Enneking: "Enneking is the first man I ever saw painting Maine in colors as Maine really looks."

Enneking was only one of the well-known artists who frequented the area between roughly 1900 and 1930. Akers met Douglas Volk when Volk came to the photography studio where Akers was working, to pick up a set of the photos he used in painting portraits. Volk summered in Lovell, as did Benjamin Newman. Norway's George "Shavey" Noyes had learned from Benjamin Champney, one of a group of artists centered around North Conway, New Hampshire, though Shavey's exquisite draftsmanship with ordinary pencil and pen must have been a product of his own talent.

We mention these names and associations to point out that



as far as we know Minnie Libby remained aloof from them. At the same time she developed well beyond her early training, which would have been highly formal, with a strong emphasis on 19th century art conventions - the same mind-set that produced the "artistic" photographs Minnie emulated.

It is, perhaps, partly a balance between Minnie's business side and her artistic side. She was a practical business person who focused on running her studio, promoted her services and supervised a couple of employees for most of her career. To make a success of such a service business one must become a production manager - take the photos, organize the processing, deliver the product on schedule.

Minnie was good at it. But this is not an environment that encourages the quiet concentration that a painter needs, and we must assume that Minnie found it necessary to be a busi-



Detail from a landscape, showing technique. Note the treatment of brush in background, rocks and reflections in the stream.

nesswoman first and an artist when it was possible.

At the same time we see a woman whose habits were solitary, perhaps had always been so, an only child who seems to have been especially close to her father. While she



had friends who called at the studio, including George and Freeland Howe, she seems not to have sought social contacts, and was active in the community only as a Sunday School teacher at the Universalist Church.

If we return to the *Advertiser* article about Minnie's flower

paintings, we see that she was using her work to create saleable objects like the glass-covered trays. She was typical in this way; most photographers and artists of her generation were expected to offer some creative ways to display their products. This included fancy frames like the ones with molded glass bubbles over the photo, or handmade frames for paintings like the distinctive designs of Vivian Akers.

We are told that Bobby fabricated the frames in his back room workshop (commercial frames were purchased at a local store). To the right is an illustration of one unusual example, date unknown, framing a fall painting that is a sort of Impressionist-like version of classic English bucolic scenes, complete with cow.

The wood shows its age, and is likely to have been distressed originally to look antique. But the detail view shows that there has been careful work on both the frame and the inset panel at the top. The technique of the painting is rough as well, the frame an appropriate presentation for the painting, the red-brown fall colors echoed in the rough brown finish of the frame.

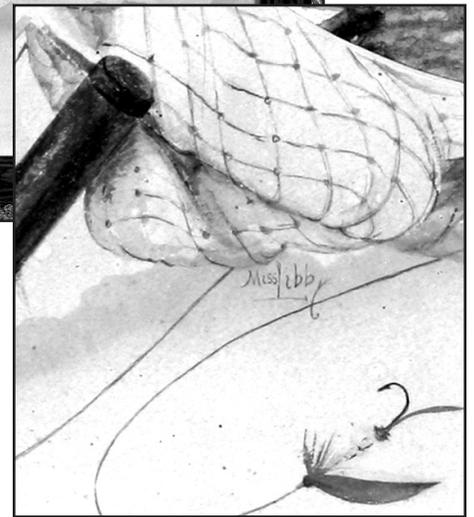
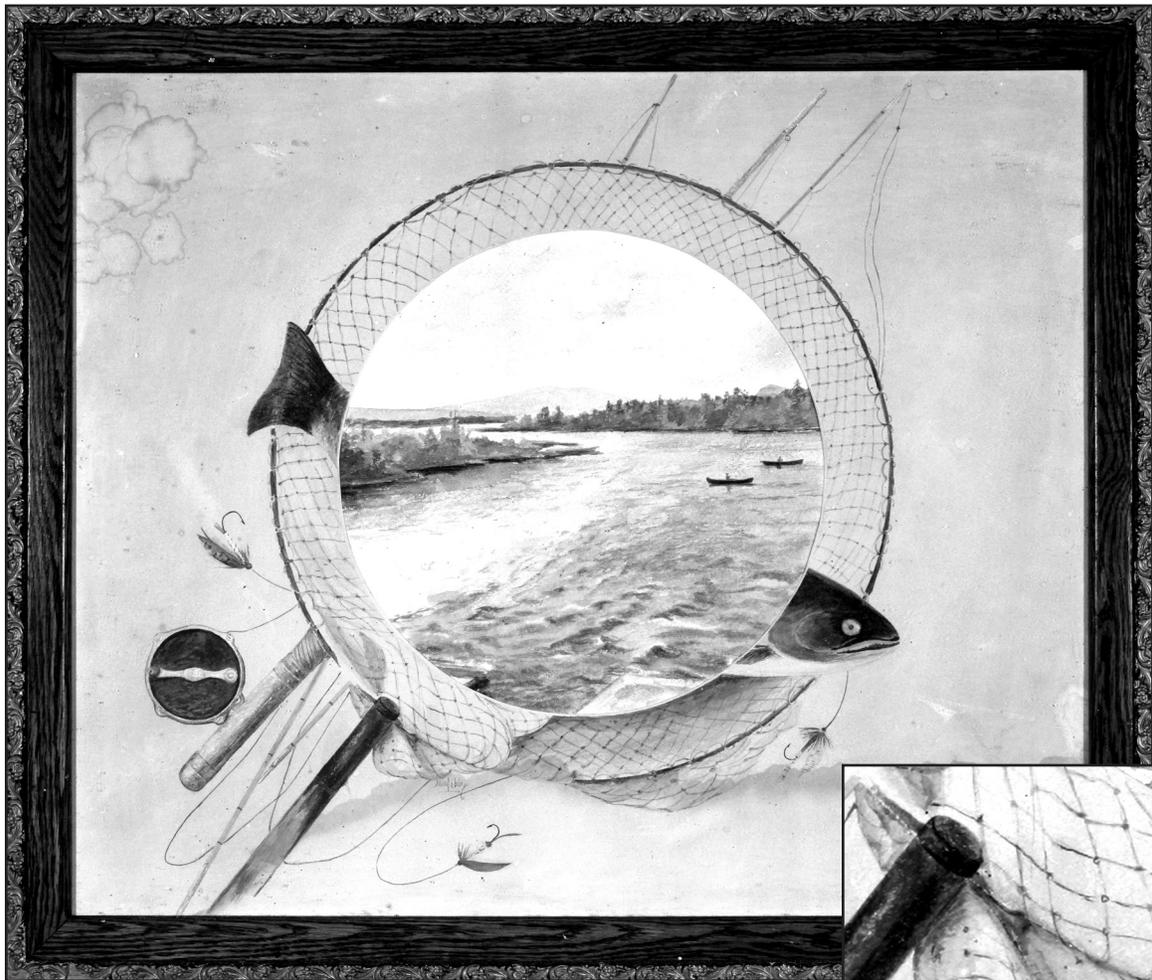
On the following page is a piece that is dated, roughly 1905. It seems likely that it was done specially for a customer - Minnie seems to have had no interest at all in fishing or other outdoor activities. It is identified as Upper Dam, in the Richardson Lakes.

We reproduce it at some size, and it is large, about 2 feet square. Its construction is fascinating. The circular inset is a watercolor, on standard rough-surface watercolor paper, of a lake



scene. The elaborate border is actually a mat, decorated as we see with watercolor and pen and ink. The fish and the fishing tackle are quite detailed. The rod, reel and line lie below, the rod having been disassembled as fly rods are for

details of the print itself. At its best, tinting produces this sense of transparent color that makes the print appear remarkably realistic. It can be difficult and extremely precise; working with an 8x10 landscape photograph, for example,



storage.

The line, with a couple of flies, lies in loose coils. The fish is shown in a hand net, as though just scooped from the water; the watercolor inset fills the net and covers the fish except for the head and tail. How the concept evolved is hard to know, but the result is as though we were experiencing several simultaneous events: observing the view of the lake with fishermen in boats, scooping the live fish from the water, then putting away the tackle after the day's events.

It is, in some ways, an eerie sort of image, unique as far as we know in Miss Libby's work, but a sign of some qualities that she seems never to have displayed otherwise.

Minnie's painting and photography joined hands in her tinted photographs. This technique goes back to the enhanced images we mentioned earlier, but evolved as something far more delicate and sophisticated.

The best examples of hand-tinting that we see locally come from Minnie and from Vivian Akers. The idea is simple: use transparent watercolors specially formulated for the purpose to color a monochrome photograph, effectively dyeing the emulsion of the print in a fashion that does not obscure the

requires the ability to enhance separately each of the smallest details.

We discuss color here in a monochrome environment, and thus cannot offer examples; one needs to examine closely examples of Miss Libby's work to see how delicate her hand could be, and how impressive some of the results are.

We return now to the events of Minnie Libby's life. Her mother Margaret died on January 22, 1914, and Hiram died on August 5, 1918. Hiram's obituary speaks highly of him: "He was strictly honorable was known as an exceptionally fine man in all his dealings, and his authority on carriages was never questioned.... He possessed a wonderful memory and was an unusually interesting conversationalist."

After Margaret died, says the obituary, the family was cared for by a housekeeper. It is not clear where Minnie lived after Hiram's death. We assume the house was sold, and Minnie

may have boarded somewhere. It is clear she had no interest in having her own home. Nor is there any record of intimate relationships of any sort; Minnie lived on her own, period.

Of her aesthetic Mione Robinson Record reports that Minnie was obsessed with light, always looking for the right



Minnie's nod to her father. This is the invitation to her 1904 opening, with her silhouette above and a photo of Hiram relaxing in his chair with the cat on his lap, which had already been published elsewhere.

lighting for her photographs, curious about how others were getting their results. Mione recalls Minnie paying her to go to Portland and have a portrait made, so that Minnie could evaluate the other photographer's lighting.

Mione says that Minnie liked going to the Norway Country Club to observe and photograph clouds. This is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, early cameras and film were unable to make photographs of clouds. So it is not surprising that Minnie should be interested in this challenge. Second, Minnie's efforts echo the work of Alfred Stieglitz from around 1930, when he was taking photographs that he called "equivalents," of the moment-to-moment changes in clouds and sky. He saw them as being deeply significant, "documents of eternal relationship" between man and nature.

Whether Minnie actually shared Stieglitz's mysticism we do not know; but it seems likely that she was aware of his work and interested in making similar efforts.

The *Life* article appeared when Minnie was 77. It was her

closest approach to fame, and a kind of summing up of her career as a photographer; though looking vigorous in the magazine photos, her age would begin to tell soon enough.



Gloomy clouds dominate a winter postcard, the sun behind, perhaps an example of Minnie's studies (undated).

In the NHS interview Mione talks about what happened. Minnie weathered the Depression and after; but after World War II changes in the photographic industry left her behind. And as the business departed for newer products and services, Minnie's independence began to be seen as being simply peculiar. She did not enjoy being the butt of humor, and began to avoid going out in public.

She had moved into the studio, probably in the 30's, and lived a solitary life, customers and friends notwithstanding. Finally her health - she had serious cardiac problems - deteriorated to the point that she moved into what was then the new Norway Hospital. She was moved to Central Maine General a couple of days before her death, and died there.

She is buried in Pine Grove Cemetary, with her parents, a single large stone for all. About a year before her death Vivian Akers painted a large portrait of Minnie, now owned by the Norway Memorial Library. In it she appears in her characteristic garb, almost smiling, her face open and filled with character, Akers able to see the friendly, gentle person inside the forbidding public persona. It is the best image of Minnie that we have, a generous and fitting memorial.

We thank the people and organizations who generously gave their time and made materials available for this biography: The Norway Historical Society and Charles Longley, the Norway Memorial Library and Ann Seikman, Moose Pond Arts and Scott Vlaun, the Western Maine Art Group, Ben Tucker III, Mione Record in her interview with the Historical Society, and numerous other members of the community who shared their memories of Minnie Libby.

David Sanderson, July 2007

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