

THE LEGACY OF GERHARD GESELL

During Gerhard Gesell's forty-three years in this country (1863-1906) he witnessed an unprecedented era of change. He saw the passing of the Indian nations which had been in control of lands west of the Mississippi less than a generation previous. He saw the boom and bust of the lumbering era on the upper Mississippi, as more sawmills were built and the pineries were exhausted. He photographed the height of steamboats on the river and documented their successor, the railroads. He watched his county's agriculture shift from "King Wheat" to corn and dairying, as it did then throughout most of Wisconsin. He observed the "improvement" of his beloved river by the Army Corps of Engineers through wing dams, dredging, levees and buoys. He saw the coming of the telegraph and the telephone, and lived to use electric lights in his studio.

Perhaps most importantly, Gesell and his fellow citizens experienced a kind of "second revolution" during America's Centennial era which ended in 1876. Following the Civil War, this country evolved from an independent but fragmented assembly of regions into a unified, interdependent nation. Whereas before, the United States had been united by law, now the bond included elements of a shared economy through wider distribution of raw materials and finished goods, emphasizing what was American over what was ethnic and local. The national mood was for more, bigger and faster growth.

In the midst of this, Gesell was determined to picture Alma and the surrounding area as being "in the making and on the move". He was not content to see a small town where he knew the potential existed for a city of size and sophistication. His photographs impart a sense of this dynamic and in so doing reflect the aspirations of his time.

Master Gesell, after three decades as a practicing photographer, decided to retire in 1903, due to poor health. On March 15, 1906, following a long and painful illness, he passed away in the presence of his family. "Gesell was a man of strong emotions and pronounced views," his obituary observed, and "everyone knew where to find him."

That holds true today for, through his photographs, Gerhard Gesell can still be found in Alma, his **Town Across The River**. He would be thrilled at the praise his photography received this summer, over 100 years after his death.

Gesell's photo **Gesell Family Burlesque** is a lighter view of the day. While portraying his family in costume is not quite unique to the times, Gesell's mix of art, humor & high seriousness in the studio helped him earn a living. Gesell family members are identified as:

- Gerhard, Jr (drinking from pitcher)
- Mrs Gesell (seated with broom)
- Arnold (drawing sword—Civil War vintage)
- Gerhard, Sr (with stocking hat & mittens)
- Wilma (with book)
- Bertha (doubled over laughing)
- Robert (sitting on floor with broom and bottle)



Gerhard Gesell's 19th century photography exhibit **Town Across The River** ended on October 5th at the Wings Over Alma Nature & Art Center but will be available again to the public, free of charge, in 2011 at the Alma Area Museum. Throughout the summer the townspeople of Alma and throughout Buffalo County have brought their family's Gesell photos for scanning and preservation. This collection will be posted soon on the Alma Historical Society website.

The exhibit of Gesell photographs reached over 5,000 people this summer, by all terms it was an outstanding success. We would like to thank the following people and organizations for their support of this summer heritage project:

Alma Historical Society, Producer of the Gesell Exhibit ***Town Across The River***

Townspeople of Alma, Contributors of Gesell Photography

Alma Area Museum, Collection of Gesell Photography

Wisconsin State Historical Society, Collection of Gesell Photography

Wings Over Alma Nature & Art Center, Exhibitor

News Organizations Who Published This Series

Katherine Goodman, Author & Compiler of the Gesell Back Story Series

Lawrence Kessinger, Author of the 1888 History of Buffalo County, Wisconsin

Gerhard Gesell, 19th Century Photographer of Alma & Buffalo County

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Photo: Gesell Family Burlesque (WHS Image 4597)