

The Allure of the Strauss-Peyton Portrait Collection

By Bruce Mathews

Since 2016, I have had the pleasure of scanning and editing thousands of glass plate negatives, (portraits), created by Benjamin Strauss and Homer Peyton between 1900 and 1930.

It has been a most enlightening experience. The allure lies, both in viewing each image as the work of art it is and yearning to know more about the life stories behind each person. The collection is addictive.

Here are but a few samples along with my thoughts on why I am so drawn to them:



Presidents and veterans: The collection includes more than “Kansas Citians” of the time. There are countless images of foreign dignitaries, Presidents, and over 1,000 World War I veterans, in uniform. Examples (as shown in this composite) include: Harry Truman photographed during his tenure as a presiding judge for Jackson County; Herbert Hoover photographed shortly after he left the White House; Gen. Leonard Wood; Maj. Gen. Herbert A. Dargue who was a pioneer aviator during WWI. His career spanned decades and he was still on active duty when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, drawing the United States into World War II. Stationed in San Francisco at the time, he was dispatched by President Roosevelt to assess the damage and report back. Unfortunately, he did not make it to Hawaii. Shortly after takeoff his plane crashed. There were no survivors; Naval Commander Hayne Ellis

was best known to Kansas Citians as the son-in-law of R.A. Long. He married Long's daughter, Sallie America. Sallie was the sister of the more well-known Loula Long Combs; and Gen. Douglas MacArthur seen in this photo taken in 1930, in between wars.



Kids: It is hard to visualize beloved “Shawsie Branton” as a kid. She was a former President of JCHS, co-founder of the Children’s Therapeutic Learning Center, President of the Central Governing Board of Childrens Mercy Hospital. The list goes on and on. I was always drawn to Shawsie by the ever-present twinkle she had in her eyes. Much to my delight there are a few photos of her in the Strauss-Peyton Collection taken when she was one year old. If you look closely at these two photos of her, one taken when she was 1 and the other when she was 91, you can notice that she had that “twinkle” her entire life. She got it from her mother.



Stars of stage and screen: Virtually every performer who took the stage in one of the numerous Kansas City theatres called upon Strauss-Peyton Studios to take their formal publicity photos. Such was the case of Kansas City's own Jean Harlow seen in these two portraits. Other clients included: The Marx Brothers; W.C. Fields; Ethel Barrymore; Fred Astaire; Charlie Chaplin; another one of Kansas City's own, actress Jeanne Eagels who, like Jean Harlow was a screen star that died entirely too young, at the peak of her career; Mary Pickford; George Jessell; Al Jolson; Just to name a few.





Hats: If there is “one” thing that jumps out at you when going through the collection of portraits, it is the ladies hats. They are gorgeous. The contrast between a portrait taken of woman not wearing a hat laid next to one of the same woman with a hat on is startling. The housewife instantly became movie star. If I have one more book left in me, it might well be about the hats worn by the women of the 1920s.



Trailblazers: Nellie Tayloe Ross was born in the small town of Amazonia, Missouri (a suburb of St. Joe, you might say). In 1925, she became the first woman elected as a Governor in the United States. She was the Governor of Montana, 1925-1927. In 1933 she was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as Director of the U.S. Mint. It would be a position she would hold for the next 20 years. She passed away in 1977 at the age of 101.

THE FUTURE MR. & MRS. SOSLAND
Morton & Estelle



Morton Sosland, age 6 months



The Glatt children - Charlotte, Estelle at age 2, and David

Kansas Citians we knew, but not like this: It is interesting to examine the photos of the performers taken during the early stages of their careers. You have to do a double take. We only knew them during the latter parts of their celebrity. Such is the case of many Kansas Citians we only knew as adults. Two are of Morton and Estelle Sosland. Here's Morton at the age of 6 months. The other includes the future Mrs. Sosland, Estelle Glatt, age 2, between her older sister Charlotte and her brother David.

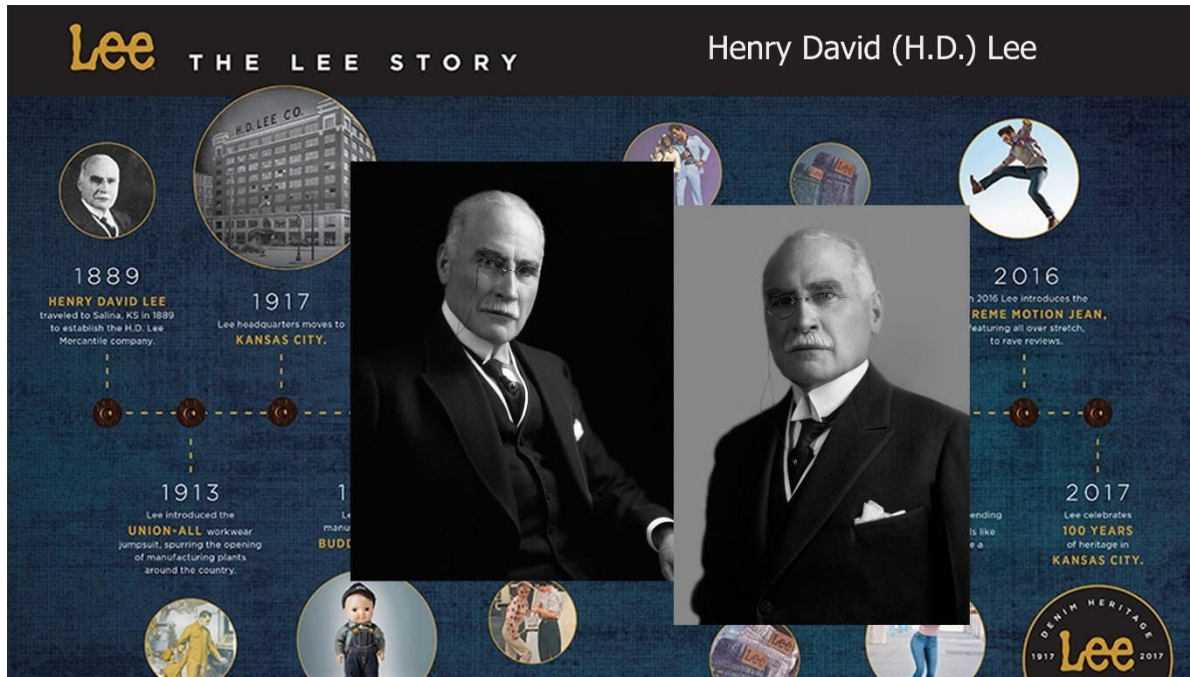


Two others include brothers, Clyde and Miller Nichols, sons of real estate developer J.C. Nichols.

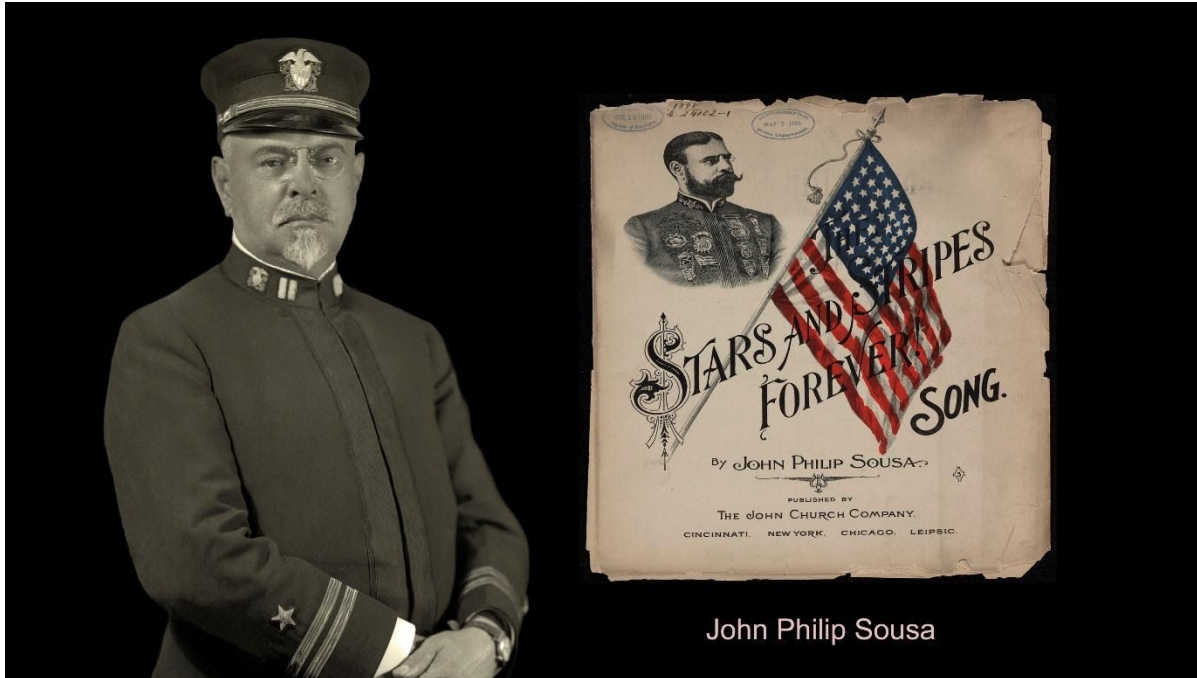


Business leaders: When the legendary Fred Harvey died in 1901, his son, Ford, took over operation of the company. Under his leadership, at its height the holdings included 23 hotels, 40 restaurants, 54 lunch counters and coffee shops, commissaries

for 60 Santa Fe dining cars, 100 newsstands, dozens of retail stores, resorts at the Grand Canyon and in Santa Fe, New Mexico, dairy and poultry farms, and a publishing division for books, brochures and millions of postcards. Ford Harvey and his wife and children, along with his sister, are buried in Independence in Mount Washington Cemetery.



Everyone is familiar with the Lee brand of jeans and other wearing apparel. But, have you ever seen a picture of the company's founder, Henry David (H.D.) Lee. The Strauss-Peyton Collection contains two wonderful images of the man. The HD Lee Mercantile Company was established in 1889 in Salina, Kansas. In 1917 the company's headquarters moved to Kansas City, Missouri.



Celebrities: During his illustrious career, the American composer and conductor of the United States Marine Band, John Philip Sousa made many trips to Kansas City. He performed at the dedication of the city's first convention hall. He was part of the contingent attending the American Legion Convention taking place at the same time as the site dedication for the Liberty Memorial in 1921. He also attended many conventions of the Shriners held here. Other related photos in the collection include a portrait of his wife, Jane and a portrait of himself in his fez hat.

Strauss-Peyton Studios ranks among the elite photography studios in history, especially during the first thirty years of the 20th century when Benjamin Strauss and his partner Homer Peyton were at the helm. For the past fifty years this unique collection of over 30,000 5x7, 8x10 and 11x14 glass plate negatives has rested in storage, untouched. It deserves to be seen. With advances in photography brought on the digital age, what a wonderful time it is to see the collection brought to life.