

Looking Back #25

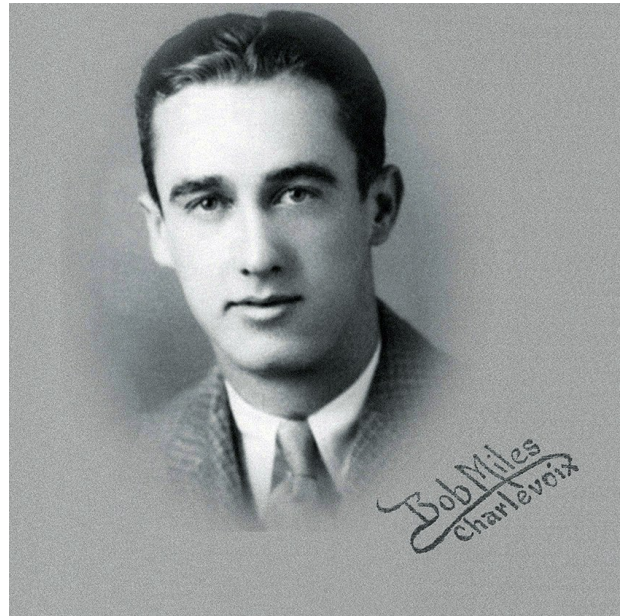
The Saving of Charlevoix's Photographic Heritage

By

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Museum at Harsha House
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Frank Hines, left, and good friend Bob Miles



Bob Miles, age 21, and his later professional stamp

My father, Bob Miles, began his Charlevoix photographic career in 1931 at age twenty-nine. At that time, the idea of an historic photographic archive of the town was the furthest thing from his mind. Prior to receiving his professional education in New York City beginning in 1929, during the Roaring 20s he worked at Frank Hines's pharmacy/soda fountain on Bridge Street while he dabbled in amateur photography, a profession within his own family. Some of his work was of excellent quality.

Mr. Hines had arrived in Charlevoix in 1880, and possessed an enormous amount of local lore that he was more than willing to share. During the few slow periods in the store, my father would "pump" him for stories of the early days, for Frank, as he said, "could make past events come alive with his keen memory and sharp wit." In 1926, Frank Hines, shown above with my father, gave him the first photo of what would grow into what the Charlevoix Historical Society now calls the Bob Miles Photo Collection. That and two others a little later from another donor, plus an 1889 aerial lithographic map of Charlevoix, constituted the entire historic photo archives of his own personal collection, a total of four images. That would be the case for several more years, when a simple event resoundingly told him Charlevoix might lose its photographic heritage forever.

The First Three Decades



The "Pilgrim", later the "Hum" in Lake Charlevoix on her way to East Jordan. This was the first picture in my collection, given to me by Mr. Frank Hines in 1926. He knew my family came to Charlevoix on the "Hum".

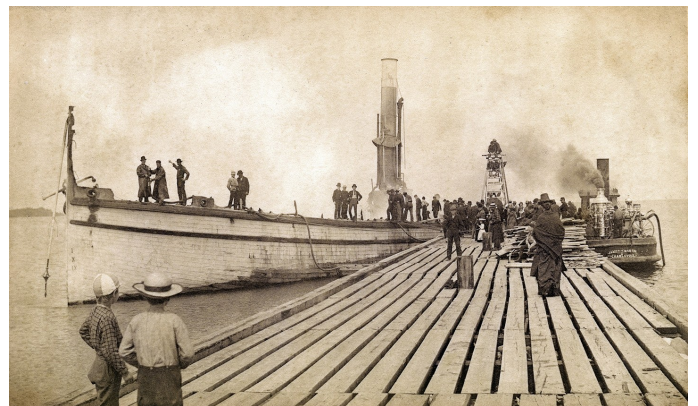
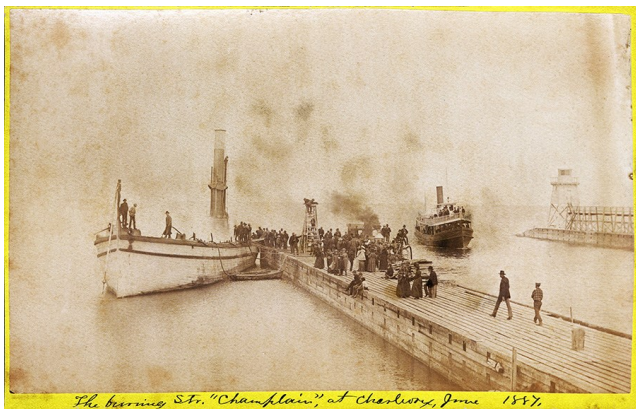
CHARLEVOIX PHOTOGRAPHS
COLLECTION OF
ROBERT C. MILES

Yacht *Pilgrim*, later the Lake Charlevoix passenger steamer *Hum* on which Bob Miles sailed to Charlevoix from East Jordan in 1913 at age eleven

"Knowing that my family came to Charlevoix on the *Hum*, he gave me a picture of the yacht *Pilgrim*, which became the *Hum*, entering Lake Charlevoix on her way to East Jordan. Upon looking back, it was possibly the possession of this one picture, plus my association with Mr. Hines, that aroused in me an interest in the early days of Charlevoix."



In the late thirties, Bob obtained an original colored aerial lithograph of the 1889 Lubow insurance map of Charlevoix,



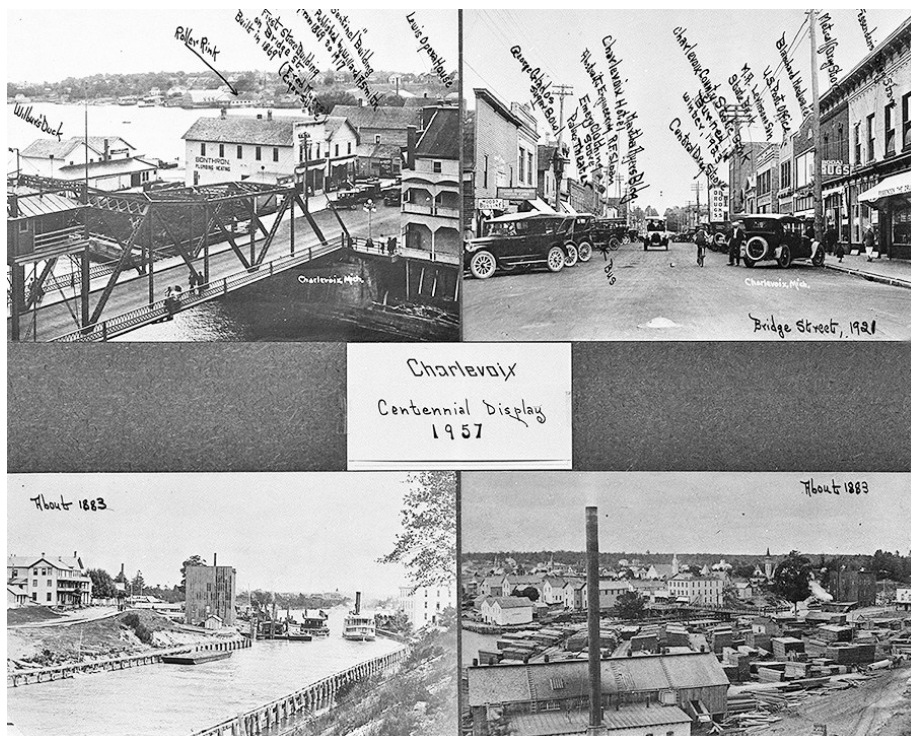
Just before World War II, he came into possession of two images of the burned passenger steamer *Champlain* at the south pier, from 1887, Charlevoix's worst maritime disaster with the loss of twenty-nine lives. And that was it. Through 1956, the collected photo history of Charlevoix could be placed in a 6 x 9-inch envelope.

Lightning Strikes

Then came a seismic shift, an epiphany if you will, that altered Bob Miles's perception of what he should be doing. It was nothing dramatic, merely a passing mention of an event, but the result of that may well be the reason why you are reading these words now. In his own words: "From 1926 to 1956 the number of old pictures in my possession had risen to three. In the meantime there was a collection of about a dozen old originals owned by a man named Art Fagan who displayed them in his store. Art was a bachelor, and when he died his collection was scattered to the four winds, for all practical purposes lost forever.

"About this same time, I learned of a man from downstate who had just purchased a farm a few miles south of town. In the attic of the farm house he had found a large box containing dozens of old photographs of Charlevoix. He had taken them outside and burned them. When asked why he had burned them, he said they meant nothing to him, were in the way, trash. Up to that time I had had a feeling of indifference toward the old photographs myself, but at this point I experienced a sudden, almost feverish concern at the thought of what was taking place, that part of our very heritage was being blotted out forever."

That's how it began, as if he'd been, as he said to me, struck by lightning. He sent out a plea for donations or he would make copies and return them. The result was overwhelming. He never knew so much still existed in attics, albums, closets, envelopes, drawers. It was like Niagara Falls. Thus came about a project that would see him through two decades and culminate in seven leatherbound volumes of an illustrated history of Charlevoix.



One of the many composite boards Bob Miles created from newly discovered photos, for display in several downtown store windows. This resulted in an even larger response of donated or loaned-for-copy photos.

"To be able to record any human experience from its beginning is rare indeed, and the old prints being lost represented the first moments of Charlevoix's existence. And it follows that the same thing was happening in Boyne City, East Jordan Ironton, and the entire county.

"In 1957, Charlevoix was supposed to celebrate its first 100 years of existence. This centennial was based on an election held in 1857 (one year after the assassination of King James Strang of Beaver Island and the disappearance of the overbearing Mormon influence over there once and for all—DLM). For some strange reason, never explained, but probably through lack of interest, no celebration was held. I had my three old prints, so I displayed them in a window on Bridge Street, and I let it be known that I would gladly copy any old prints and display them in different store windows along the streets. The project snowballed beyond my wildest dreams," he wrote. "Before the summer was over most every store in town had a display of old pictures, and I had a file of hundreds of negatives. At this point my interest and work took off like a jet."



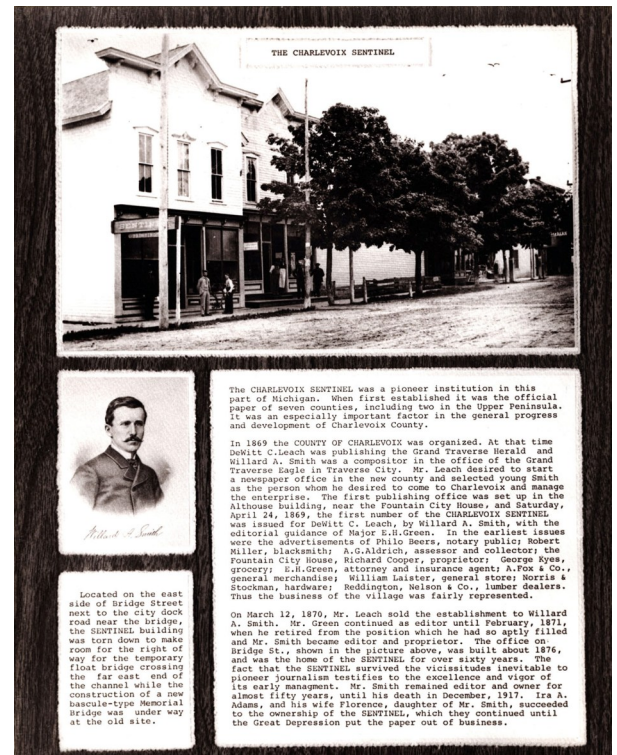
One of the prizes of the search, above. Bob had long heard of this photo, but now he put every effort into finding it. He succeeded after a long quest. At first, the owner was very reluctant to part with it even for a day so he could make a copy. "It took a year of asking, begging, and bribing to get the one picture known to exist of the windstorm collapse of the 250-room Inn Hotel construction in late 1897," now one of the classics of the Historical Society's collection. Two men were killed, several seriously injured. The hotel was rebuilt and ready for a June, 1898 opening, the showplace of northern Michigan.

"As one can imagine, problems arose. Problem #1 was to get the correct information about the picture. A picture may be worth 1000 words, but I discovered that without words most pictures are worthless. Problem #2 was dating some of the older prints. I wanted, as much as possible, to put these pictures in a chronological sequence. That involved the accurate dating of each, which was, our course, impossible. However, by closely studying the prints, it was possible to come close to the actual date and sometimes land right on the button. Surprisingly, few of the prints had dates or other information printed or written on them."

To my father, this was only a challenge to be met and dauntlessly conquered. His immense need to discover became almost an obsession. He began immediately to start researching and writing his own history of Charlevoix based upon what had come to him, a fourteen-year project which began to bear fruit with the first volume of an eventual seven presented to the Charlevoix Public Library in 1971. The last volume was completed in time for the nation's bicentennial in 1976, all of them containing heavy paper sheets of images and text placed in plastic sleeves, all in leather-bound albums. A complete set is available for viewing at the Historical Society's Museum at Harsha House.



Bob Miles presents the first of an eventual seven volumes of his town history to the Charlevoix Public Library, 1971.

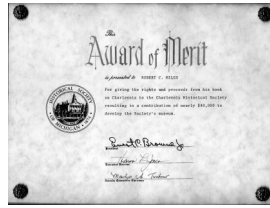
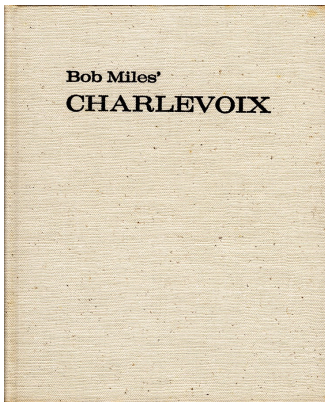


A sample page

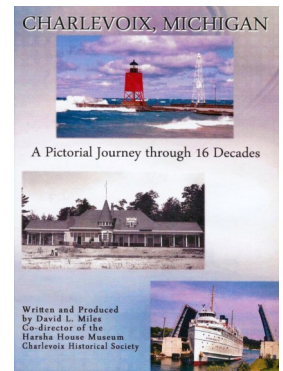
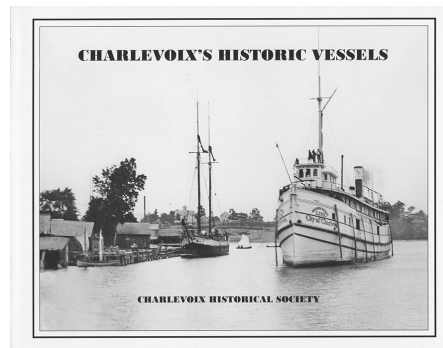
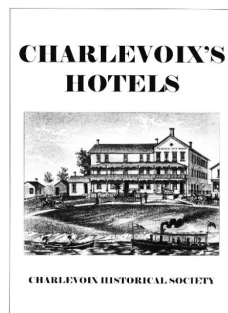
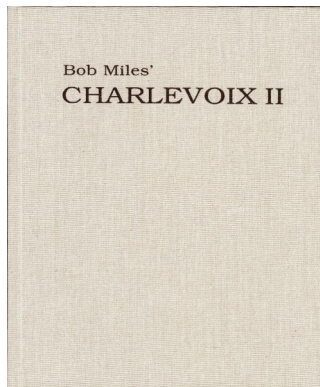
"As we who grow older know, without the past the present is nothing."—Bob Miles

What else resulted because that unknown man burned a box of Charlevoix photos? And someone asked him why he did it? And the answer in turn by sheer luck reached the ears of my father? Only this:

“Mighty Oaks from Little Acorns Grow”—English proverb



A book of his work published 1976 by the Historical Society received a state award, 1981. The proceeds from the book financed the wrap-around museum addition to the Harsha House in 1980 (right).



Eleven more books, two documentary DVDs



Tens of thousands of donated images including the half-century photo morgue of the *Charlevoix Courier*; eight historic signages downtown, along the lower channel, and at the railroad depot; many exhibits; illustrated lectures around the region; Charlevoix's name sent around the nation and the globe.



A 2017 Emmy for co-producing a third documentary shown on Michigan PBS in 2016; another state award for a book published in 2020. All of this happened because . . .

Bob Miles had love affair with Charlevoix

by PEG OHLE
The man who had a “long-standing love affair with the City of Charlevoix” died last week.
Robert C. “Bob” Miles expressed that love in many ways but he will best be remembered for his legacy of local history in pictures.
“Bob Miles’ Charlevoix-A Century in Pictures”, a beautifully bound volume containing pictures of Charlevoix and Charlevoix people was published in 1976 as a bicentennial project of the Charlevoix Historical Society.
The above quotation about Bob’s love affair is from the preface to that book, written by a friend. The book contains 365 photographs, complete with captions and other explanatory material, all prepared by Bob and given to the Historical Society as his contribution to the Society’s Museum building fund.
Sales of the book netted almost \$40,000, which was spent to renovate the Harsha House on State Street into a museum facility. The museum which Bob Miles made possible now houses his extensive personal collection of old photographs. Some of them he “shot” himself, and those taken by others he carefully collected, researched, and reproduced. Bob Miles started seriously collecting



Robert Miles — 1902-1986
in the Charlevoix Public Library.
While Bob Miles’ photographs are

Bob Miles also enjoyed working with Petokey stones. In 1976, he completed a “bicentennial tower” of polished Petokey stones which is now in the Historical Society Museum. It is eight-and-a-half feet tall, weighs about 250 pounds, and took three years to build.
The bicentennial tower consists of 200 “stories”, each of which represents one year in the history of the United States. The outer square of the base represents the country before the coming of the white man. The inner square of the base is made of 13 sections, each representing one of the original colonies. On each corner of this square are elevated letters “S”, “W”, “F”, and “A” indicate the four basic freedoms of speech, worship, press, and assembly.
The tower builds upward with special markings for the wars in which this country has engaged, depression days noted by black Petokey stones, and the single story at the top (the 200th) commemorating the nation’s bicentennial. Topping the final story is a replica of the Washington monument.
Bob Miles collected, cut and hand-polished all of the Petokey stones used in his tower, another contribution