

In Focus: A Tale of Two Photographers

by Greg Hoots



A farm family pauses for a short celebration for Alma photographer Gus Meier in this photograph produced from a glass negative in this view from the 1890s. The mortar appears relatively fresh on this limestone farm house. (Paul Gronquist)

Louis Palenske was born in Richardson County, Kansas Territory in 1858 (renamed Wabaunsee County in 1859) in a log cabin on the banks of Mill Creek, the son of German immigrants Frederick and Caroline Palenske. Louis was the second white child born in the county, preceded only by his brother, August.

Louis was born within sight of the spot where the town of Alma would be established when he was nine years old. Palenske was taught at home by his mother and his aunt, and it was not until he entered school in Alma in 1867 that he learned to speak English, as German was spoken exclusively in their home. Louis attended school in the upstairs of the first courthouse in Alma, located at 227 Missouri Street, until his sixteenth birthday.

It was during his sixteenth year that Palenske made a decision to become a photographer. His schoolteacher that year was a photographer, and the instructor offered to teach Louis the trade in exchange for ten dollars. Louis beseeched his mother to finance the venture, and after a series of lessons, he learned to take tintype photos as well as a new type of photography, pictures printed from negatives transferred to paper.

For the next five years, Palenske worked in the summer on his father's farm, and in the winters he apprenticed at photography studios in Wamego, Topeka, and Kansas City. In 1877 Palenske took an excursion train to Denver and was captivated by the breathtaking landscapes of the mountainous region.

In the spring of 1880, Palenske purchased a "photography tent," and traveled to Rico, Colorado, a booming silver mining town in the

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San Juan Mountains. He spent six months in Rico, taking views of the miners and landscapes. During his time in Rico, he sold photos to Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine. In November, Palenske sold his photo tent and returned to Kansas.

In 1881 Palenske established his first business in Alma, a book and stationery store and a photography studio. Two years later, on January 7, 1883, Palenske married Emma Thoes, the daughter of Joseph and Augusta Dieball Thoes, early Wabaunsee County pioneers. Throughout the 1880s Palenske operated his photography studio in a small building behind his bookstore. Early in 1887, having garnered the respect of the Alma business community, Palenske opened his first bank under the name L. Palenske & Co., Bankers.

It was in 1887 that Louis became friends with Gus Meier, a young man of twenty-two years who had studied at Kansas State Agriculture College in Manhattan after growing up at Halifax, about ten miles south of Alma. Meier had taken an intense interest in photography upon meeting Louis Palenske and had expressed his interest in learning the trade after deciding not to return to college in the fall of 1887.

On September 14, 1887, Louis Palenske wrote a letter to Gus Meier, addressed to the family farm at Halifax. He wrote, "*Dear Friend, As I have not heard from you for some time, I thought I would drop you a few lines. How are you getting along? What do you think about the Photograph trade? Are you reading faithfully? If you could come down soon we would go out and take some views, but they have to be taken soon. Come down as soon as you can or the viewing season will be over. Come down on Sunday next if you can. Yours truly, Louis Palenske.*"

Meier accepted Palenske's offer and came to Alma, moving into the Palenske's home while studying photography as an apprentice to Louis. Within the year, Meier purchased the Palenske studio in Alma.

After selling the studio, Palenske entered the banking business in earnest, establishing the Alma State Bank in 1889, later partnering with the Alma National Bank, and then, in 1907 he created the Commercial National Bank. For twenty-five years Louis Palenske retired from photography and focused on his business interests in Alma. During those years Palenske constructed five limestone business buildings along the east side of the 200 block of Missouri Street, creating what was known as the Palenske block.

Meier excelled at the photography trade, while his genial personality and friendships throughout the community brought much business his

way. Meier was a commercial photographer, and in a career where his portfolio of images numbered in the tens of thousands, perhaps as much as ninety-percent of his work was studio portraits. However, Meier's extensive work in Alma and throughout Wabaunsee County provided a unique look into the lives and livelihoods of these Flint Hills residents.

Meier specialized in photographing local businesses, selling the images to the owners. Many of those images include interior views illuminated by an attachment using flash powder for a light source. His work ran the gambit, from men posing in front of comical backdrop sets to wedding photos, school photos to photographs of funerals. His expertise behind the lens, coupled with his business sense in creating photo work during hard times, served him well in the trade which he pursued for a half-century until his death in February of 1941.

Louis Palenske and Gus Meier shared the close bond of mentor and student, as well as the comradeship shared only by best friends and brothers. To the seven Palenske children, Max, Minnie, Fred, Arnold, Laura, Victor and Florence, Gus was a gleeful partner in jokes and shenanigans that kept the family considerably entertained. For two decades, Meier was the Palenske family photographer, taking hundreds of photos of the Palenske children and family. To the Palenske family, Gus Meier played many roles, best friend, brother, father, uncle, and comrade.

On November 27, 1912, at the age of 47, Gus Meier married Mary Wetzel, and from that time, Mary became a part of the Palenske family as well. For over a half-century the friendship between the Palenske and Meier families endured, despite the distance that divided them for two decades.

The early 1900s brought mixed fortunes for the Palenske family. In 1897 Louis Palenske began his first of two terms in the State Legislature, traveling to the Statehouse from Alma by train for the sessions. The first ten years of the 20th century also were a time when the Palenskens enjoyed traveling throughout the United States, but particularly through the Western states. Palenske's interest in landscape photography and in the Western trails grew during these years.

It was in 1902 that Louis Palenske made a business decision which would reshape his future and that of his entire family. The Alma National Bank had made a loan to H. F. Disbrow to purchase the flour mill from Lorenzo Pauly. The mill was in poor repair and within a short time Disbrow was taken ill, and he returned the mill to the bank in default.

Louis Palenske felt that the loss could be recouped if some repairs could be made to the mill and if it were modernized. Palenske paid the outstanding \$2,000 balance on the note and assumed ownership of the mill. He added a steam-powered engine to the mill, increasing its capacity. The upper dam across Mill Creek which impounded water that operated the existing wheels was rebuilt at considerable cost.

Palenske acquired the mill at a time when all of the smaller flour mills in the state were being driven out of business by the huge mills in the cities that operated on smaller margins, providing a larger profit for the farmer, even when the cost of transporting the grain via rail was calculated. For ten years Palenske owned the mill, continuing to upgrade the equipment while operating at a loss. In the end, he borrowed heavily to complete \$40,000 in improvements at the mill, and when it sold at auction in 1913, the mill brought only \$700. The Palenskes lost everything.

All of the investors and note-holders for the bank were repaid in full, and the Commercial National Bank's remaining assets were acquired by the Farmers National Bank, leaving Louis and Emma Palenske penniless.

Palenske constructed a studio in McFarland in 1914 but after three difficult years found that the town could not sustain a photographer. Rather than compete with his friend, Gus Meier in Alma, he set out on a journey to the coalfields of southeast Kansas in search of work as a studio photographer. First, he went to Scammon, Kansas believing that the many coal miners living in the area would make for good business.

Settling in Scammon less than three months after the United States entry into World War I, Palenske endured considerable prejudice as he had a German name and spoke with a German accent. In a monograph dated 1918, Palenske reveals, "*In less than a week's time a man told me that he heard that I would be arrested. He said that they were taking me for a German spy; that I was not down there to just take pictures.*"

The photography business at Scammon was poor, as well. Palenske learned that coal miners were not like the silver miners he had met in southern Colorado. The coal miners were poorly paid, overworked, and simply not interested in having a portrait made.

Palenske heard that in nearby Burlington, Kansas, there was a vacant photo gallery, and after only a few weeks in Scammon, he moved to Burlington. While the photography business was better in the farming community, the prejudice against those of German ethnicity was just as

prevalent as in Scammon. Palenske described the "*hatred for everything German in our country, so that everyone with a German name was looked down upon and was persecuted, insulted and slandered. I have heard it said, 'We can trust no one with a German name.' This, of course, puts me in the category of the HATED class.*" No one was more relieved and pleased when the armistice was signed late in 1918, and the anti-German sentiment began to wane.

While living at Burlington, Palenske constructed a high-power transmission line between Burlington and the town of Gridley, Kansas which had been without power. Palenske entered into a twenty-year contract to provide power to Gridley; however, he sold his power company when he and Emma moved to Osage City, establishing a studio there in 1928. In 1936 Palenske retired from studio photography, and the couple moved home to Alma into a house which their son, Fred had purchased for them.

In the mid-1920s, while operating his gallery in Burlington, Palenske purchased a Korona Panoramic View Camera, a large-format landscape camera equipped with film holders for 7x17-inch and 8x20-inch sheet film. While Palenske used the camera for events featuring large groups of individuals, such as his views of the 1926 dedication of the Haskell Institute football stadium in Lawrence, his real motive for the purchase of the Korona camera was to use it photographing the American West and the pioneer trails. He took his first trip down the Old Santa Fe Trail in about 1928, followed by excursions throughout New Mexico, Arizona, and the Badlands of South Dakota. In 1930 Palenske traveled the Oregon Trail and the California Trail, taking over 100 photographs during that trip. Later that year he made a second trip on the Santa Fe Trail. In 1937 Palenske returned to Rico, Colorado, where he had operated his photo tent in the summer of 1880, and the same year he made his final trip through the Black Hills.

In 1936 Palenske collaborated with New York publisher, Wilson-Erickson, Inc. in republishing Alonzo Delano's narrative about the California gold rush, *Across the Plains and Among the Diggings*, illustrated with fifty-five of Palenske's panoramas of the Oregon and California Trails.

The Palenske's 1936 return to Alma was a wonderful reunion for Louis Palenske and Gus Meier. In the numerous family and group photos which Louis Palenske would engineer and orchestrate, often it was his old friend, Gus, who would finally trip the shutter while Louis

would pose with the group. In their final years, the two accomplished photographers lived within sight of each other's homes and spent much time together.

In a 1938 autobiography, Louis Palenske wrote, *"it is my intention to get out another book containing Santa Fe Trail, sight-seeing, southwest Colorado, and the Black Hills pictures. But it takes time to finish a book. I still have plans to do many things, my work is not finished, I hope. I expect to make some money out of our several hundred large negatives, but I am now though making long trips."*

Gus Meier continued to operate his gallery in Alma's "Palenske block" throughout the 1920s and 1930s, having moderate success despite the varying economic conditions. Gus and Mary Meier continued to enjoy the friendship and proximity of Louis and Emma Palenske throughout their final days. On February 17, 1941, Gus Meier suffered a fatal heart attack at his home in Alma.

Louis Palenske spent his final years in Alma, enjoying his family and many friends, while maintaining an unmatched enthusiasm for his views of the American West and the pioneer trails. Palenske passed away on August 18, 1943 at the age of 85.

Gus Meier's photographic body of work included perhaps 10,000 images or more. A small fraction of that total survives today. After Mary Meier's death in 1966, heirs to the estate donated over 160 of Gus Meier's photographic prints to the Kansas State Historical Society. A large number of glass negatives, however, were destroyed. Several hundred Gus Meier photographs are included in the Wabaunsee County Historical Society's archives. There are also hundreds of Meier images held in private collections.

In 2009 while working in an attic of a house located at 725 Iowa Street in Alma, Steven Fink discovered a box containing almost 300 glass negatives which had been stored in the attic of the house for over a century. Property records reveal that during the years of 1891 through 1899, the house was owned by Gus Meier. A close examination of the negatives revealed that all of the images originate during that same decade. These negatives, now owned by Alma resident Paul Gronquist, represent the only Meier negatives known to have survived.

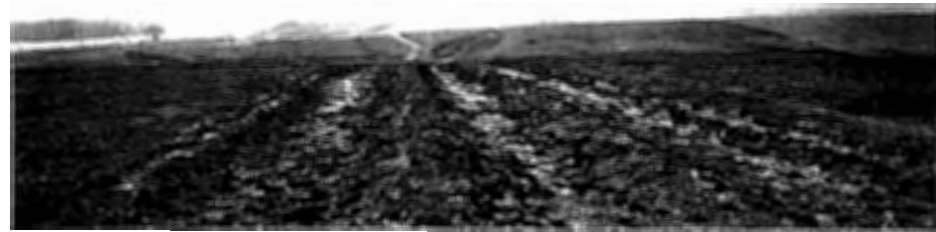
The "several hundred large negatives" to which Louis Palenske referred in his 1938 autobiography have disappeared, and none are known to survive. Of the thousand or so panoramas that Louis Palenske produced with his Korona Panoramic View Camera, only sixty-two prints are known to exist, including about fifty Western landscapes. The Wabaunsee County Historical Society maintains the Palenske archives,



Chief Two Gun White Calf, considered to be the last great chief of the Blackfoot Nation, and his four-year-old granddaughter meet with Haskell Institute Superintendent Hervey B. Peairs before a crowd of observers at the 1926 dedication of the new football stadium at Haskell. Chief Two Gun White Calf is believed to have been the model who posed for James Earle Fraser's sculpture which appears on the "buffalo nickel". (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



A contingency of nineteen Blackfoot Indian Chiefs and family members pose for Louis Palenske's camera during the 1926 dedication of the new football stadium at Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



A wide band of ruts from the Santa Fe Trail are quite visible in this photograph taken ten miles west of Dodge City in 1930 by Louis Palenske. The tracks of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad can be seen at the far left, running along the banks of the Arkansas River. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



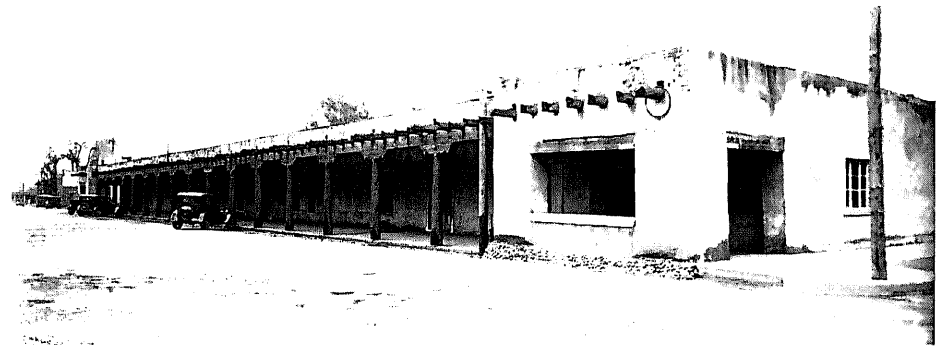
Louis Palenske is seen here in his new studio that he constructed in McFarland, Kansas in 1914. Palenske operated this studio for three years before relocating to southeast Kansas. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



The St. James Hotel, Cimarron, New Mexico, seen here in 1930, was built by Henri Lambert in 1872, and was originally known as Lambert Inn. The hotel and saloon became notorious during the 1880s as the spot favored by the most dangerous outlaws and lawmen of the American West. It is said that 26 men died in gunfights in the saloon, and when the saloon's ceiling was replaced in 1901, workers found over 400 bullet holes in the ceiling. The hotel, located on the historic trail, still operates today. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Taos Pueblo, one of the eight Northern Pueblos, is located a mile north of Taos and was the center of the Pueblo community nearly 1,000 years ago. The Taos Pueblo was a multi-storied residential housing, and each home within the adobe structure was self-contained and not connected to other dwellings within the larger building complex. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



The Palace of the Governors, located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the oldest public building in the United States, having been constructed in 1610 by Spain as the center of government for their Nuevo Mexico colony, which included Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, California, and New Mexico. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Council Grove, Kansas, seen here in 1930, was a historic town located on the Old Santa Fe Trail, known as the “jumping off point” for early travelers, giving them one last chance to purchase supplies before arriving in Santa Fe, New Mexico. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



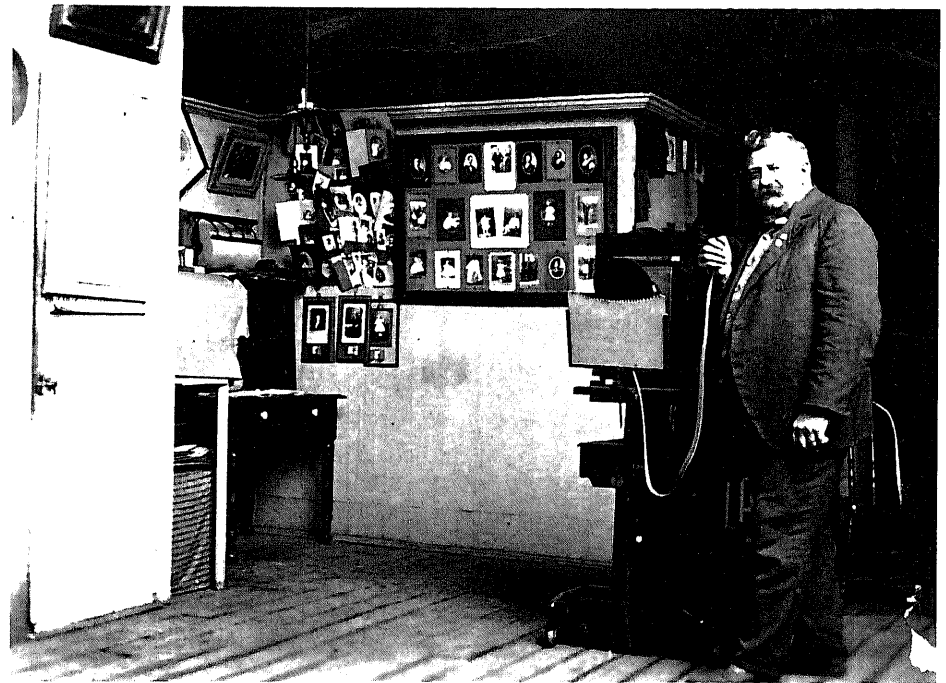
In 1937, after moving back to Alma in retirement, Louis Palenske made his final Western trip taking this photograph in the Badlands of South Dakota on his way to Mt. Rushmore. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Garden City, Kansas was a town that was founded in 1878 on the existing Santa Fe Trail. The town boomed in 1879 when the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad placed a switch station in Garden City. Louis Palenske photographed the Old Trail’s path as it passed through Garden City in 1930. The Windsor Hotel stands at the far right. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Spanish Peaks, a pair of mountains near Trinidad, Colorado, was a landmark on the Santa Fe Trail, visible for over a hundred miles. Louis Palenske photographed the peaks in 1930. Twenty-one years later Ansel Adams photographed the same twin mountains. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Gus Meier, seen here with his studio camera, operated his gallery in the old Palenske bookstore building, located at 210 Missouri Street in Alma. In this view, circa 1925, one can see the many samples of portraits that Meier had affixed to the wall, along with what appears to be sample calendars featuring a portrait. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Louis Palenske traveled across the Badlands of South Dakota in the summer of 1937. One of the many photographs which Palenske created on this trip was this view of Mt. Rushmore while work on the sculpture of Lincoln's head was underway. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



This Gus Meier view from the mid-1890s shows two couples seated in a buggy apparently preparing for a parade. The buggy is adorned with American flags while each man is holding a hat, perhaps from a lodge affiliation. In the background, to the right, one can see the back of the first Wabaunsee County Courthouse, and across the street, the "Palenske Hall" building had been rebuilt after an 1890 fire, doubled in length by the time this photo was taken. (Paul Gronquist)



Gus Meier photographed the interior of Hickory Jones' tobacco shop in Alma, Kansas in the late 1890s. Jones' wife and his brother-in-law, Charlie Loehr are also seen behind the counter in this early Alma business. (Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Jake and Henry Hecker's traveling medicine show is seen in this Meier photograph, circa 1900, located on the lot at 100 Missouri Street in Alma, Kansas. The medicine show "stars" had tents in the foreground. Inside the arena a sign reads, Hecker Brothers' Cherry Pepsin. (Rick Hecker)



One of Gus Meier's "lost photos," the negative from which this photo was created, was stored in an attic of an Alma home for over a century. In this 1890s view, one can see the Alma Signal building, and to the right of that building, Phil Birk is seen standing in the doorway of his meat market. These buildings are located at 319 and 321 Missouri Street in Alma. (Paul Gronquist)



A farm family pauses for a short celebration for Alma photographer Gus Meier in this photograph produced from a glass negative in this view from the 1890s. The mortar appears relatively fresh on this barn. (Paul Gronquist)



Gus Meier not infrequently photographed funeral processions, views of the deceased lying in state, and burials. In this view, dated February 19, 1892, the funeral procession of William Schroeder is seen leaving his home, where Schroeder was lying in state, heading west toward the cemetery. (Wabauensee County Historical Society)



In this Gus Meier "lost photo", the Volland Rock Island section crew pose for the Alma photographer at a side track in the Volland railroad yards. Identified from left are Joe Diehl, Tony Haig, Scotty ?, John Cromer, Sam Reber, and Ed Brasche. (Paul Gronquist)



This photograph, dated 1928, shows the White Eagle gas station soon after its opening. Jim "Chunky" Degenhardt owned the station, and in this photo, Ronald Faulke, left, operator of the station, and Elmer Ringel, a station employee, are seen at the pumps. The station was located at 301 Missouri Street in Alma. (Dr. and Mrs. Larry Ringel)



This view of Gus Meier, left, and Louis Palenske was taken from a frame of a 16 millimeter film made on August 10, 1935 on the occasion of Florence Palenske's wedding to Earl Hallgren. The photographers were adjusting Palenske's Korona Panoramic View Camera and loading a film holder for a group photo of the wedding party. (Wabauensee County Historical Society)