

Smiles and styles come and go



VINTAGE VIEWS

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Tavistock and District Historical Society

These three similar photos in the Lemp Studio Collection are a good reflection of two things: smiling was not fashionable in early photography and gender identity was not expressed by very young children's parents' clothing choices, as they are today.

As a former photojournalist and photo teacher of many years (now retired), I've taken untold numbers of pictures of people in all sorts of situations in many countries. If they were posing for me, I'd often say "Smile with your teeth," meaning they'll look their best in the pictures with their mouth slightly open and their teeth showing, compared to either not smiling at all or smiling with their mouth closed, which looks pinched and stiff. These are modern ideas. Look at photos of a century or more ago and they didn't smile on demand from the photographer, rather, they consistently looked at the camera very expressionless, like these three youngsters.

Also, 100 years ago, gender identity for pre-school children was much less rigidly defined by their parents through clothing choices compared to current times. Look at the fashions of these three boys and you'll see elements of femininity. Of course, it's their parents choosing their clothing and this ambiguity was common in the western world up to about World War I, starting in 1914. So why do toddler boys of this period – roughly 1860-1914 – wear what appears to be dresses and not pants? It's easier to change diapers if the child is wearing a dress or dress-like garment compared to pants. Also, pants require more precise measuring than dresses or skirts.

Widespread industrialization in 1920 changed this with more and more automated machines doing the work, standard patterns and processes in factory settings and mass distribution by the newfangled internal combustion engines in delivery trucks of this period.

Another interesting point, though not evident in these pictures, is how pink for girls and blue for boys has done a complete 180-degree switch! Up to the early 20th century, blue was for girls and pink for boys. Hard to imagine today, but true. There's no clear explanation of why this switch occurred.

So remember, when posing for photos, smile with your teeth and you'll look your best.

The last History Mystery: The question was "In the photo of the Tavistock Milling Company staff, what hint says this group picture was not taken in John "Jack" Lemp's photo studio at the back of his Hope Street pharmacy?" This was first answered correctly by Gary Pearson of Tavistock who wrote "Lemp's studio on Hope Street did not have a window in this direction as noted in the picture." Mr. Lemp's studio was built about eight years before electricity came to Tavistock, so he had the typical photo studio built for this time, which included a large, east-facing, angled window to provide ample light. The window illuminating the staff photo is visible on the right, which is a standard vertical type. Lemp's big window was closed years ago with roofing, but its odd angle is still visible.

This week's History Mystery: What was the ongoing technical problem that bedeviled photographers – amateur and professional alike – when taking photos of pets, babies and toddlers that lasted until about the 1960s? The first reader to send the correct answer to me at tim_mosher@hotmail.com will have their name and community name or rural route number published in the next Vintage Views article.



(PHOTOS FROM THE LEMP STUDIO COLLECTION)

This reclining boy with two well-behaved dogs are posing in one of the two Woodstock Street photo studios that predate "Jack" Lemp's purpose-built studio on Hope Street. The fur rug and painted backdrop appear in numerous other pictures in the 1890s but, unfortunately, we don't know which photographer took this image, the boy's or even the dogs' names.



Dresses for boys at this time were very common. His jaunty cap askew on his head reveals a typical boy's haircut, though it wasn't uncommon for both boys and girls at the time to have long locks. The dog is on a spool platform rocking chair.



Same studio but a different child and dog without recorded names or dates again. This fellow is no longer a toddler, hence the knickerbocker-style pants like his father. I wonder if the boy is sitting on a sibling he pushed under the rug.

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