



Margaretta K. Mitchell 280 Hillcrest Road Berkeley California 94705

Jan 10
1978

Dear Laura,

Just a note to say that the enclosed is a xerox of your corrections which I made without further typing to save time. The Editor is ready - the book is on schedule. It will be further edited by Barbara Burn at Viking — and shortened — But if you have anything more to correct*, please do so now and return to me.

I would love to have had a Navaho story and had hoped you would condense the one on Canyon de Chelly — which we cut.

Anyway — Thank you.

Best,
Greta

* If you do please put a ✓ in margin so I can tell — Thanks — G.

Health & Eminon

5671 at 335

LAURA GILPIN

My favorite subject in school was physical geography and I think I come by that naturally. My father knew the country very well and the first territorial governor of Colorado was William Gilpin--I think he was my grandfather's first cousin. Once my father was down in New Mexico somewhere and he came home with a big Edward Curtis print of Canyon deChelly^{*}, the one with the seven horsemen. It's on the cover of the big Curtis book. It was on our wall for years. I just lived under that picture. I'm sure that's why I'm doing this book now on the Canyon.

I was interested in the Indian and I don't know why, but I can date a lot of things back to 1904. When I was 13, my mother sent me on to St. Louis to visit her closest friend, my ^{for whom I was named,} namesake Laura Perry, who was blind. The plan was that we would go out to the fair every other day and it was my job to describe exhibits to her. I think that taught me a kind of observation that I would never have learned otherwise. I can also remember being very much fascinated by some Igorots^e from the Philippines. Also, I can remember I found something that my father wrote. He was down in old Mexico managing a mine, and he was by himself and it was way off from the railroad and he wrote home sort of a parody on "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" and in it he described things that he saw under the trees^{Christmas}--a train for my brother and a developing

This was dated 1903.

your film
 tank for me. It was one of those funny machines that
 you rolled under a red apron from one side onto the other
 and then ^{you} poured ^{the} in developer. I can just picture it now,
 but I don't know what ever happened to it.

TP
 The San Francisco and San Diego fairs were the next
 transition, I guess. That was in 1915 and I went out with
 a friend of my mother's who just wanted somebody to go
 with her to the fair. She took me along which was very
 nice for me, and we stopped at the Grand Canyon. In the
 meantime I had seen, through a fellow in Colorado Springs
 who was one of a little group of teenage kids, the Lumiere
 Autochrome ~~Autoprom~~ plate, the first single-plate color process, and
 I started using the process. I have one thing that I know
 I did in 1908 ~~on it~~. About 1905 or '06 my mother and my
 brother and I had been in New York and a friend of my
 mother's had had portraits made by Gertrude Käsebier.
 My mother took us to Mrs. Käsebier's and she did some
 portraits of all of us.

Q check spelling see page 8 for autochromes TP
 I ^{recently} found a whole envelope of stuff from the San
 Francisco Exposition and that must have been my first con-
 tact with sculpture. I photographed, I think, every piece
 of sculpture that was outside in those fairgrounds. There
 must be fifteen or twenty different subjects. I was so
 surprised! I wrote to Mrs. Käsebier to ask her where to
 go to study. She was really a remarkable woman.

ank
 My mother was wonderful because in 1916 for a girl

the following year
 She recommended the Clara H. White School of
 photography

to go off on her own was not the usual thing, but whatever I wanted to do, she was for; she was right behind me. She was wonderful--the more ~~that~~ I think of her the stronger I feel that. She was really a remarkable woman.

6.K
My efforts
I had the flu very badly in 1918, the bad flu, and it landed me in bed back in Colorado and then when I was well enough to get to work again I'd send her proofs or send them to my friend Brenda Putnam and she'd take them over to Mrs. Käsebier and then I'd get a letter from her criticizing me, ~~so that~~ I'm the very proud owner of one copy of Camera Work number one, autographed by Mrs. Käsebier. Mrs. Käsebier

Before I went to New York, I spent a summer managing a chamber music group in Colorado Springs. I wrote to Brenda Putnam and told her that I was coming on to New York to study and did she know of some place ~~that~~ ^{where} I could live? She wrote back that there were three other girls besides herself who had just taken an apartment on West 57th Street and there was one more room--would I take it? So that landed me there and right into the sculpture world. Music

And piano again because Brenda was also the pianist of another group. The first exhibition print that I ~~did~~ ^{Brenda's} was of that trio. ~~Her~~ father was the Librarian of Congress. He bought a few of my prints and there are quite a few there, but I ~~got~~ ^{recommended that some of} both Mrs. Käsebier's work and ~~in~~ ^{added to the Library collection} Mr. White's work ~~for him~~. The Library bought a great made

How must be line missing here.
Following the death of both Mrs. Käsebier & Clarence White

~~lot of them. So that collection is there and I'm just~~
 pleased that I had sense enough to do that.

Clarence White was a marvelous teacher. Paul
 Anderson was the technical ^{instructor at Mr. White's School} ~~man~~ and he wrote two different
 editions on the technique of pictorial photography, as it
 was called then, and another one purely on the technical
^{side} ~~one~~ of it. I was lucky again because it was the first
 year that Max Weber was in the United States. ~~and~~ He
 gave a course in the history of art and design that was
 a wonderful experience, ^{and} Then Mr. White himself pulled
 it all together. He ran the school in his own style.
 And he'd give us problems to solve. The weekly criticisms
 were very important. He certainly knew how to inspire
 everybody and I know it was because of his wanting us to
 go out and do things that I did those two night things
 in Central Park in the snow storm. The first view camera
 I had was a 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 and I remember lugging that
 over into Central Park in a heavy snow storm with one
 holder with two glass plates in it. And I made those two--
 one of them seen by very few people. I haven't showed ^{it} ~~it~~
 anywhere, except that I had it here in the gallery for a
 little while. I'm not parting with that one until I get
 a duplicate print of it.

The schooling in New York ~~that~~ ^{what I wanted} was wonderful, it
 was just ~~it~~ and I soaked it up! While I was there, I
 did quite a little work from other sculptors. I

my preliminary
 says 1891 for
 his first
 year.

photographed all of Brenda's sculpture and I got jobs from other artists and I got quite a little portrait work around New York. But ~~it wasn't~~ ^{I wanted} the big open spaces ~~for~~ ^{so} I went back West.

I got started as an independent photographer and partly because I was alone so much in Colorado, ~~because~~ ^{and} I had to work things out for myself but I was doing well. I did a lot of advertising work for a woman I knew very well up there who made the most marvelous candy I've ever

known in my life anywhere and she also ran a beautiful gift shop. That was fun and there were good problems to

work on and for years I did ~~those~~ ^{and photographed the} architectural ~~things~~ ^{buildings} ~~for a friend in Denver.~~ ^{for Fisher & Fisher in Denver.}

My mother was the one that always wanted me to be independent. She was a very marvelous person and she was all for my doing what I wanted to do.

~~and~~ ^{for} In one earlier period we lived on a ranch over in the western part of Colorado and I had a darkroom which is where I did some of those earlier ~~plates~~ ^{color} plates. I had a darkroom of sorts and I was always fussing with photography but I also went into the poultry business, raising turkeys, and I earned enough money at that time to go to the Clarence White School. In Colorado I had worked alone really.

~~It never occurred to me that others weren't using platinum printing but then I was in Colorado and I was~~

I was

very isolated because there was nobody ^{near me} ~~up there~~ even interested in photography, and I was just plugging away on my own. It was in 1920 as a matter of fact that I came down to the Santa Fe area. Miss Foster and I used to come down on a camping vacation every year for a month and we gradually explored around.

I did not see Paul Strand a great many times, and I don't recall that we ever once discussed platinum. He did marvelous platinum prints, you know, in the early days. Well, it's the most beautiful image you can get. It has the longest scale and you can get the greatest degree of contrast and these I'm showing you are the Colorado sand dunes. It's not a ^{difficult} ~~hard~~ process, it just takes time; that's why other people don't use it, ~~and you have to have a contact negative~~. I have seen some young people's work and I think that they are not making strong enough enlarged negatives. That is where the trouble is; their negatives are too soft and I have yet to see a good black.

So many of the younger people don't print deeply enough in tonal values. For instance, ^{one photograph} ~~they~~ here had a ^{platin} ~~thing~~ with quite an expanse of roof that was all covered with snow ~~and~~ If you covered over the rest of the picture, ^{this part} ~~it~~ was just blank paper. There was no texture there and texture in whites is very important; ~~and I think I have helped her that way~~. But this is characteristic too of lots of younger people--you'll find blank whites after

blank whites that don't mean a thing and a very simple rule for a good print's quality is correctness of values-- that's all it is!

I can remember that I wrote a lot of articles on different kinds of prints. Colorado Springs just had very little art background of any kind ~~whatever~~, at that period, and I can remember writing a series of articles for the paper on different kinds of prints.

I always wanted to play the violin, but I never got very far with it. So that's something else that was forgotten. I was terribly interested. There's a great link, you know, between photography and music--~~there are no two ways about it.~~ One is continual sound and the other is continual vision. ~~There you are-- there's your comparison!~~

I'm not teaching much. I don't think I'm a good teacher ~~because I'm not~~...I mean, ^{Adams} Ansel is the big person on that score because he's so accurate and precise where I'm not. To me it's getting the picture first and then after you've worked a long time I think you develop a sense of light values on a ground glass when you're under a focusing cloth. ~~The thing is the~~ ^{where} Working under a focus-
ing cloth, ~~because that excludes everything else and that's~~ ^{is excluded}
~~then~~ ^{a picture} ~~when~~ you can begin to put it ~~all~~ together. I think you develop a judgment for how much light there is on the ground glass as well as on anything else. It was funny that I should have gotten into autochromes but there was

see p. 2

a group of us at the age of 18 or 19 who used to play around together and one boy, Alfred Curtis, was very scientific and he must have read about those because they were invented in 1907 and my earliest dated autochrome is from 1908. I remember falling for them head over heels and doing a great many. I don't know why I hit the exposures right, but I evidently developed that sense at that time. I must have had a 5 by 7 too, because I have a lot of 5 by 7 transparencies but one of the problems with them was that it was such a delicate emulsion. It was all made in France, you know, and it was very easy to get a little break in the emulsion which would always make a green spot, so I've got a great many perfectly good ones with green spots on them. I suppose some of that could be retouched. I hadn't even thought about that-- I must look into it. I'll have to go through these again.

The Navajo project [The Enduring Navajo] was fifteen years in completion. I had no backing, I had no grant, or anything like that, it was just something that I had to do. Miss Foster was down here with me then and we camped pretty much all over the whole reservation so that I covered it pretty generally and then as the things built up I ended up with loose-leaf dummies with prints in them and all the Navajo wanted to look at all the pictures and somebody would find somebody they knew and

that always opened a door. They don't forget, they just never forget you--it's incredible.

There are things in the Navajo book that if they were taken by themselves I would simply discard, but they belonged with the story. And if someone says that the photographs are not visually ideal, well, I just don't argue about it. Everything has to have meaning. There's no point in arguing about it. It's either there or not there.

ank
My involvement with the Navajo people has affected my own way of life, of course. It feels natural to me. I had an insight into Navajo feeling that day of the gathering together of a family and a certain kind of just easy beautiful happiness that existed in spite of the loss of their mother the year before. I had gone over to the Park Service and there was a woman there who had been there for a long time in the office and she wanted to see my collection of photographs and I took it in and showed it to her and she came to one picture I did of this woman. Then she took me up to see a weaver up near the mummy cave, and we went up a little hill, I remember, and there she was sitting under a shelter and I spoke to her and she spoke no English but we conversed through the guide and I showed her some pictures and she was willing for me to do something. I walked around behind her and there was the mummy cave, one of the most important ruins in

the whole Canyon de Chelly complex. Nine hundred years before and here is the woman sitting in front of you. I was very much excited about it, then I made one portrait of her whole face. That was in 1973.

Q? In 1975 I was back over there at the Park Service and Mrs. _____ looked at those two pictures and she asked if Betty Mitchell had seen these? Betty Mitchell was this dead woman's daughter. She picked up the telephone and called Betty and she came right over to the Park Service and she told me these are the only pictures that have ever been done of her mother, so I took them out of my dummy and gave them to her and she thanked me very nicely and went on back to her job. Two days later she called me at the lodge and asked us to come up to their place in the canyon on Sunday. Never a word about anything, we got up there and she had gathered her entire family-- her mother's two older sisters, the widowed father, all her brothers and sisters and the Lord knows how many others, all together for this family reunion and I was just there to do anything I wanted to do all day long. I never had such a day! And the two older women went down into the field and brought up armsfull of corn and they roasted some corn and then they made what they call a _____ bread. They cut the corn off the cob and put it through a meat grinder and then put it back in the husks and cook it.

They do have a special way of building the fire and getting the right heat and everything. I got the details of all of this going on and they slaughtered a sheep which was for lunch and so we were there for the whole afternoon. I have been thinking about how I am going to handle this new book and this was what I was thinking about in the middle of the night last week, writing down that day, and I think I'm going to end the new book with the story of that day.

I told you that I photographed all the sculpture in the San Francisco Exposition. There was also a flyer out there who was one of the first ones to do skywriting. He wrote his own name, Art Smith, and I was fascinated. I've got a whole bunch of negatives that I made of him in 1915. Then there's that big platinum print that's a big landscape from one east of Colorado Springs, the buildings way down low and the whole of Pike's Peak and this much sky above it with three army planes flying in formation. I had never really flown very much until I went to Boeing in the war.

The only thing that I can ever remember about prejudice against me as a woman is a very funny comment one day. I was doing architectural photographs for two architects in Denver and I was on 16th or 17th Street downtown, photographing a bank across the street, and I had my 8 by

10 and I was under the focusing cloth. I heard a woman's voice saying "That's it, girlie; show them how!" Personally, I can't see any difference for men or women... either you're a good photographer or you're not.

I wonder if you saw among the Boeing things one that was the real problem-solving photograph of all that I have. I don't think it's too much of a picture, but they told me they wanted me to find a woman in the plant who was working in the wing section and who had a son in the Air Corps. So I hunted around and I found a woman who had not only one son but two sons in the Air Corps. So the idea was to have a photograph of her thinking about this son. I thought about it a little and I found the woman. She brought me in some picture of one of these sons of hers and so I thought about that for a little bit and I made a lantern slide of it and projected it onto the wing ~~the~~ rivets of the wing where she was working. And then I had to light her so that it threw a shadow from her onto the wing and then I could project the image of the boy onto that. That was the worst problem solver I had to do.

I really consider myself a landscape photographer more than anything else. The book I wanted to do in 1945 was the Rio Grande from source to mouth and they jumped at that and I had a contract right that day and came back

and I had the nerve to start on it two weeks before the war was over with gasoline still rationed. I started in southern Colorado where I wouldn't need to travel too much. All of the landscape work was 8 by 10. I seldom made more than one simply because I didn't have the film. That is the training that Boeing job gave me; you see these things relate to one another.

When I began photography at the Clarence White School we didn't have meters and it was a question of getting sensitivity of eye on the ground glass when we were under the focusing cloth. That's what it amounts to-- you make your own meter right there. I've shifted and changed a certain amount and I have a meter which I think is excellent, though it's too slow. I go back to the first very simple principle--that you expose for your shadows and develop for your highlights and that is it, period. That's what Ansel does with his system but some people refine it almost to excess. I think some of them make exposures nowadays because they fit their system rather than the other way around.

Well, I dallied a little bit. I struggled with the violin and I never got very far. I don't think I could have ever faced an audience as an instrumentalist. For me to get up and give a talk about photography always makes me laugh. I wasn't thinking in terms of trying to produce

^{fine}
~~fine~~ art, but the principles have to be there; and that is evidently very instinctive and ingrained thing in me. Lots of things that I have done that I've delivered and don't think about it were just jobs to do, problems to solve, like the advertising work I've done. But out of my own caring--such as my landscape photography and the study of the Navajo--well, that's what you keep. What you care about is finally what you keep.

What's kept me working? Well, I don't know. I suppose I could have sat back and my family would have taken care of me but I've always believed in producing, myself, probably because it was a thing I could do better than anything else. Georgia O'Keefe has been very nice to me about my work. She came down even with her eyesight to see my retrospective show here and she called and she said "You've done it as it is, and you've done it with love." That was typical of Georgia to say something in as few words as possible.

Being 86 gives me a jolt if I stop and think about it, but fortunately I don't think about it. It just seems to me when I look back that I must have wasted an awful lot of time.

In the catalogue of my recent show here in Santa Fe I wrote:

"Creation is something you have to see and feel.
In my work I watched the living creation. I record the
things I see. If you're busy and interested, life seems
very simple."