



Book Review: Picturing Men

By [Jesse Monteagudo](#)

Picturing Men: A Century of Male Relationships in Everyday American Photography

PICTURING MEN: A CENTURY OF MALE RELATIONSHIPS IN EVERYDAY AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY by John Ibson; Smithsonian Institution Press, 237 pages; \$32.95. ([buy book](#)) Picturing Men is a collection of photos of American men, in groups of two or more, taken between the 1850s and the 1950s. But this book is more than just an assembly of photographs, no matter how fascinating they might be. As author/collector John Ibson writes, "This is a book about two general subjects that I believed needed more attention - the history of everyday photography in the United States and the history of this nation's male residents' relationships with each other. I have examined these histories not separately but in what I see as their revealing intersection. I based the study primarily on my own collection of vernacular photographs of two or more American men together . . . a collection that now approaches five thousand images." Ibson, a professor of American Studies at California State University in Fullerton, assembled his collection from "visits to photography sales, antique shows and shops, flea markets, and estate sales", as well as eBay auctions.

To those of us who live in 2003, these photos of men embracing, holding hands, or sitting on each other's laps seem very gay; and indeed they have been used by gay historians to illustrate their books or documentary films. Though some of those men were doubtlessly homoerotically-inclined, others were just expressing a nonsexual affection for their fellow man that was more socially-acceptable in the 19th and early 20th centuries than they are in our so-called "sophisticated" age. In Ibson's words, "those photographs captured a world of feeling between men that eventually would largely disappear from view." In that golden age, "All-American boys" would wrestle, skinny-dip together, and indulge in horseplay that might or might not have had a sexual component. Today, boys don't shower after gym class and leave an empty seat between them when they go to the multiplex together to see a movie. Things have changed, and not for the better.

Like many non-western societies, even today, 19th and early 20th century American society was sexually segregated, which made men feel more at ease with other men than with women. As many of the photos in Picturing Men show us, "Studio portraits of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are fresh reminders of how segregated by gender American society remained during that time, of the degree to which men and women were often strangers to each other, inhabiting two distinct social and cultural worlds. . . . When it comes to nineteenth-century photographs, clearly more emotional bliss was displayed in those of men together than in those of men and women." All of this apparent innocence ended in the 20th century when the new science of "abnormal psychology" created a new category of man called "the homosexual." Thus, "a desire for same-sex activity would eventually cause a man 'to fear he was a homosexual person rather than someone merely tempted to commit a sin.'" Public affection or intimate friendships between men ceased as men worried that they'd be considered queer; by themselves and by others. By the 1930s, "The male ritual of visiting the photographer together, once so common and seemingly so full of meaning, appears to have virtually died out . . ."

As a social constructionist, Ibson downplays the existence of homosexuality and gay men before 1900; and exaggerates the extent of nonsexual male friendships in order to make his point. But one does not have to agree with Ibson's thesis in order to enjoy Picturing Men. The wonderful photos in this book capture the variety and vitality of male relationships in this golden age, whether or not there is anything sexual about them. In fact there is nothing erotic about these photos, except perhaps for some of the beach shots and a 1912 photo of the eight-man Stanford crew team, backs to the camera, naked. More common are the fully-dressed couple or group shots of cowboys, miners, lumberjacks and sailors, more comfortable with each other than with the camera. Some of the men are dressed in business suits, street clothes, or uniforms; while others wear fancy costumes, not excluding drag. There are also props aplenty, such as cigars, rifles or paper moons.

"A century of vernacular photographs chronicles a regrettable journey for American men, from a closeness that once was as full of facets as a diamond to a fear of closeness aptly symbolized by the empty seat between two guys in a movie theater." Though we don't know if (non-gay) men will ever be as comfortable with each other as they once were, we can look back and appreciate these remnants of a time when American male intimacy was more socially acceptable.