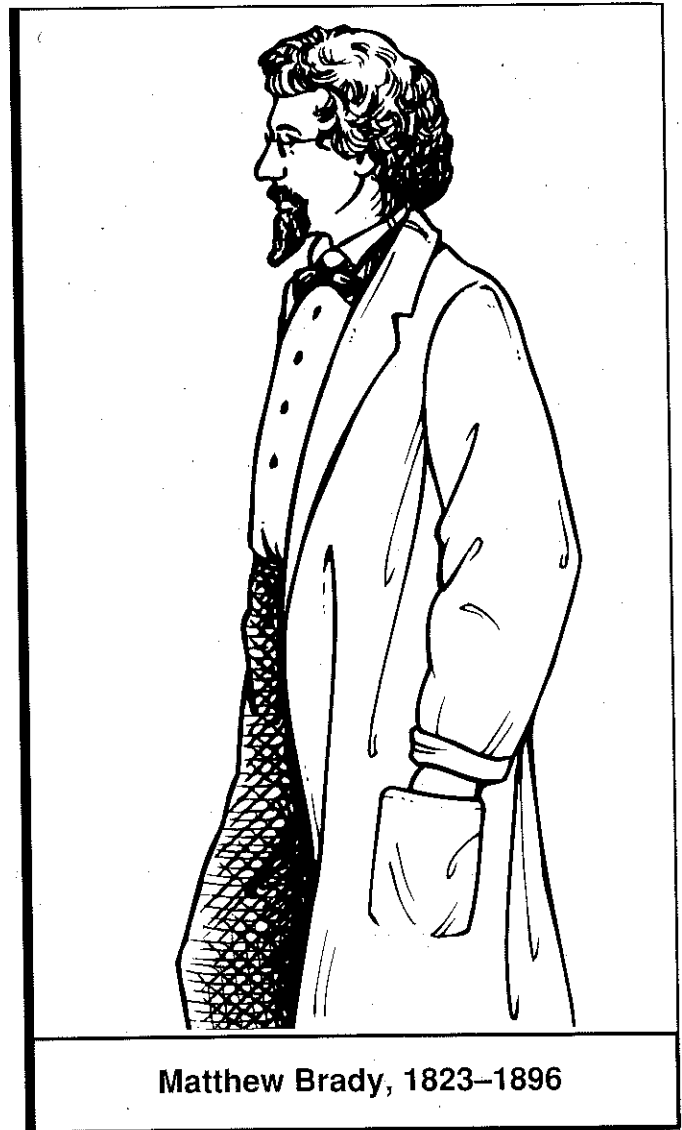


Picturing History: The Story of Matthew Brady and His Camera

Matthew Brady was fascinated with the new camera portraits of people that were being taken in France in the late 1830s. These pictures were called daguerreotypes (də ger · ə tīps). While he worked at other jobs, Brady studied chemistry and learned everything he could from people who knew how to take these pictures.

Up to that time, people had to hire artists to paint their pictures. Often, the artist improved the way a person looked so he would receive more money for the portrait. Pictures made with a camera were more accurate.

In 1844 Brady opened a photographic studio in New York City and began to use this new photography process. It was very difficult to make a daguerreotype. First, Brady prepared a box with a silver surface and exposed it to iodine vapors. Next, he placed the silver box inside another box. In 5 to 30 minutes, the surface, or plate, turned yellow. The box had to be placed in the camera at just the right time. The person being photographed had to sit without moving for up to 30 minutes. If the picture turned out too light or too dark, it had to be taken again.



There was no way to tell what the photograph would look like until the yellow plate was in the darkroom. There, under dim candlelight, the plate was placed in a box and exposed to heated mercury. When the image appeared, it was fixed with a solution of salt. These pictures were very delicate. Even rubbing with a soft cloth could rub away the picture. The picture was protected in a glass-covered box. Gradually, with better chemicals and methods, people didn't have to sit so long. A photograph could be taken in 15 seconds.

Many famous people came to Brady for their pictures. His studios photographed all the presidents from John Quincy Adams to William McKinley. A portrait of Abraham Lincoln is one of Brady's most well-known pictures. Singers, people in the theater, and famous writers came to Brady to have their portraits taken. King Edward VII of England took time for a portrait at Brady's when he stopped in New York on his way to Canada.

Matthew opened a second gallery in Washington, D.C., and began photographing famous people in the nation's capital. As his two studios expanded, he had to hire assistants to help with the work. More assistants were needed as Matthew's eyesight, always poor, grew worse.

In 1851 Matthew took 45 daguerreotypes to the World's Fair in England. He won a silver medal for his collection. In the United States he won more prizes for his work.

In 1860, when the American Civil War began, Brady thought it was important to take pictures to preserve the war for history. Because the pictures had to be developed right after they were taken, Brady carted his equipment, darkroom, and helpers to battlefields and army camps. During the Battle of Bull Run, his wagon was destroyed when the Union Army had to retreat. Brady made his way back to Washington, D.C., on foot.

Matthew continued to take photographs of the battles that took place near Washington, D.C. His pictures were put in books. At that time, people didn't want to be reminded about the war, and very few people bought the books.

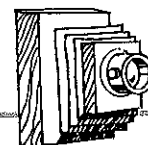
Because Matthew spent so much time photographing the generals and the war, his studios began to lose money. To save his photography business, he tried to sell his collection of photographs to the government. In 1871 Congress agreed to buy 2,000 portraits, but they didn't set aside money for the purchase. Because Matthew could not pay his debts, sheriff's deputies came to take over his New York studio. Fortunately, he was able to take out many loads of photographs before the lawmen arrived.

The government finally gave Brady \$25,000 for many of his pictures, and he was able to continue his work in Washington, D.C. He finished his presidential collection by photographing the presidents that were still living. In 1881 Brady closed his last studio.

The government did not take care of the plates they had purchased, so Matthew's collection was damaged and in need of restoration. When the government refused to pay to save his photographs, many priceless, historical pictures were ruined.

Today, when we see the copies of the Brady photos that survived, we know what Abraham Lincoln and many other famous people really looked like. We can see scenes from the Civil War because Matthew Brady, his camera, and his photographic assistants were there.

Name _____



Questions about The Story of Matthew Brady and His Camera

1. How did people get pictures of themselves before there were cameras?

2. Why were the first daguerreotypes not well suited for taking pictures of people?

3. Why do you think famous people wanted to be photographed by Matthew Brady?

4. Why did Matthew decide to photograph the Civil War?

5. Why didn't people want to buy Brady's books with pictures of the Civil War?

6. Why were many of Brady's pictures ruined?

7. Why was Brady's work with the camera important?
