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Arcadian Visions of the Past

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Arcadian Visions of the Past

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the article's first paragraph:

A couple of years ago, my wife gave me a book about my childhood hometown of Richland, Washington, a small desert city where I haven't lived for more than twenty years. The book, a pleasantly slim volume simply titled *Richland*, is one in a series of photographic histories of communities around the United States published by Arcadia Publishing. Like all of Arcadia's books, *Richland* is packed full of photographs, and its pages showed many of the buildings, neighborhoods, and desert landscapes that I had known intimately as a child but had mostly forgotten about after so many years. I was surprised, when I sat down to look at the book for the first time, to find myself filled with an intense nostalgia for a place I was always yearning to leave as a child. For hours that day I flipped through the pages, moving backward and forward, letting one visual cue after another spark memories from my childhood. I simply couldn't put the book down. When we went to visit my brother, he too was quickly charmed by what he saw and we embarked on a lengthy remembrance of our shared past.

Disciplines

American Studies

Comments

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Arcadian Visions of the Past

Mark Rice

A couple of years ago, my wife gave me a book about my childhood hometown of Richland, Washington, a small desert city where I haven't lived for more than twenty years. The book, a pleasantly slim volume simply titled *Richland*, is one in a series of photographic histories of communities around the United States published by Arcadia Publishing. Like all of Arcadia's books, *Richland* is packed full of photographs, and its pages showed many of the buildings, neighborhoods, and desert landscapes that I had known intimately as a child but had mostly forgotten about after so many years. I was surprised, when I sat down to look at the book for the first time, to find myself filled with an intense nostalgia for a place I was always yearning to leave as a child. For hours that day I flipped through the pages, moving backward and forward, letting one visual cue after another spark memories from my childhood. I simply couldn't put the book down. When we went to visit my brother, he too was quickly charmed by what he saw and we embarked on a lengthy remembrance of our shared past.

The pleasure I derive from looking at *Richland* is shared by many thousands of people who page through similar books all around the United States, each of us caught up in one of the biggest success stories of the publishing industry in the recent years: Arcadia Publishing, specifically its signature "Images of America" series of books. In 2000, *Publishers Weekly* named Arcadia Publishing one of the nation's fastest growing publishers (Milliot, "Small"), and a 2005 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* called Arcadia Publishing the "biggest thing in the history book business these days" (Nolte). The attractively designed, sepia-toned covers are instantly recognizable in bookstores, gift shops, and libraries throughout the United States, bearing titles such as *Italians*

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in *Albuquerque* and *Around Cooperstown*. Drawing from local photographic archives, and written by community history-minded authors, the books are visual feasts that can be quite fun to look at, and they generally receive positive local press. Over 3000 titles have been published in the series since 1993; on average, there are sixty “Images of America” books for each state. With each book containing more than 200 images, it is easy to see how significant a resource for historical photographs “Images of America” has become.

Arcadia Publishing was founded in 1993 as the American subsidiary of UK-based Tempus Publishing. It was a good time for such a venture because, in the words of the historian Mike Wallace, the United States was “on a heritage binge” (x) in the 1990s. The so-called “culture wars” were in full swing then. After more than two decades of scholarship that challenged consensus models of American history and, instead, presented stories of struggle, conflict, and compromise that gave shape to modern America, a well-organized conservative backlash had emerged. On the one hand, debates roared about how the past should be represented in high school history curricula, museum exhibitions, and Hollywood films. On the other hand, for a great many Americans, the past was an uncomplicated place that they could vicariously experience through weekend visits to historical sites or antique stores. Corporate America was attuned to this trend, with articles bearing titles such as “Age, Sex, and Attitude Toward the Past as Predictors of Consumers’ Aesthetic Tastes for Cultural Products” (Holbrook and Schindler), and “Nostalgia and Consumption Preferences: Some Emerging Patterns of Consumer Tastes” (Holbrook) published in a variety of marketing journals.

A business venture tucked inside the heritage market that flourished at century’s end, Arcadia Publishing carefully shapes the story of its ascent to read like a straightforward story of capitalist success, and the company takes pride in its Horatio Alger-like struggle to achieve respectability. A 2003 promotional flyer celebrating the company’s 10th anniversary reads, in part:

As with most new ideas, we were told that it wouldn’t work, and we set out to prove that it would. As it turned out, the sales of Arcadia’s first titles outshone our wildest dreams. We presented the new sepia-colored photographic histories to bookstores and during that first holiday season we simply could not get books

to stores quickly enough. We have some very fond memories of delivering boxes on Christmas Eve, and some fonder memories of celebrating the fact that our hard work had paid off. (“10 Years”)

Presenting itself as a model of American individualism—pointing out that Arcadia started out as “a one-woman operation,” for example—the company assures that they “had no idea how the concept might be received” (“10 Years”), underscoring their participation in a risk-taking capitalistic venture that resonates so deeply with the American public, and that is often celebrated in the books the company publishes. That the series began as part of an international collaborative with a focus on local history goes unmentioned in this telling.

The company’s anniversary flyer seems to have been carefully worded so that the image the company promotes about itself is in sync with the image of the past found in its books. The use of the phrase “fond memories” in the context of looking back to the company’s first year echoes the nostalgic framing of the past found in the series, while references to the “holiday season,” delivering boxes on Christmas Eve, and the celebrations surrounding the success of that first year lend a sense of cheerful gift-giving and goodwill to the endeavor. This Norman Rockwell-like vision of a cottage industry neatly segues into a description of the powerhouse business enterprise that Arcadia has become: “Between 1993 and the new millennium, Arcadia Publishing saw many changes: we recruited, expanded, opened new offices, and added cutting-edge book production technologies[....]We now have four offices across the country and more than 2,000 titles in 10 different series” (“10 Years”). Currently headquartered in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, Arcadia Publishing was “one of South Carolina’s fastest growing companies in 2002” (“Arcadia Publishing Moves”). In its creation story, Arcadia Publishing reveals itself as a recapitulation of American industrial history.

While Arcadia’s commercial success is undeniable, the stated goal of “publishing a series declaring itself to offer the history of American communities” (“10 Years”) invites challenges to its use of historical photographs, as well as the company’s creation of a standardized and commodified vision of the past. There is something to admire in these books, which treat small towns as seriously as large cities, and in many cases may be the only historical treatment of a community. Moreover, by

allowing non-professional historians access to a publishing opportunity that is not a vanity press, Arcadia Publishing appears to operate in a uniquely democratic vein of historical inquiry. This apparent democratization calls to mind Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that Americans "prefer books which may be easily procured, quickly read, and which require no learned researches to understand. They ask for beauties self-proffered and easily enjoyed; above all, they must have what is unexpected and new" (Tocqueville). On each of these counts, the "Images of America" books hit the mark. Of course, de Tocqueville was somewhat skeptical about democracy, and a correspondingly healthy skepticism about Arcadia Publishing's visions of the past is warranted. My analysis draws from information provided by the company itself, as well as from the books that I have examined.

Ample evidence can be found in Arcadia Publishing's promotional materials that the "Images of America" series is best understood in the context of the recent heritage binge noted by Wallace. The company's website (www.arcadiapublishing.com) proclaims that its mission "is to make history accessible and meaningful through publishing books that celebrate and preserve the heritage of America's people and places."¹ As was previously suggested, for many Americans an "Images of America" book may be the only source readily available for studying their local history. As a result, Arcadia Publishing is able to play a significant role in shaping contemporary attitudes toward the past, particularly for those readers more interested in their own local history than in wider historical forces. Because an "Images of America" book may be the only historical study published for a given town, it can easily take on the status of the definitive treatment of the subject whether or not the author or publisher intended it to be so. This is quite a role to play for books whose central guiding questions are "What did the town look like in the past?" and "Who lived here?" ("10 Years").

Asking what a place looked like and who lived there can only go so far in terms of illuminating the role that historical events played in shaping contemporary social realities. As Wallace notes, the pasts encountered in heritage sites "remain segregated from the present. We rummage around in them for pleasure or profit, we appropriate them, we consume them, but we do not think it crucial to understand them in order to understand ourselves" (x). It seems to me that a similar dynamic is involved in reading an "Images of America" book. The books work well

as entertainment, but they often don't help readers truly understand how the past gave rise to current dynamics of a community. To give one brief example, in the book *Richland*, careful attention to the faces found in the photographs reveals that "who lived here"—a town of negligible size until its role in the Manhattan Project of World War Two—was almost exclusively Euro-Americans. Not until I moved away from Richland at the age of 18 did I realize how monochromatic my hometown was despite its presence in a part of the country with a large Hispanic population and despite considerably more diverse populations in neighboring towns. Much later, I learned that Richland was a "sundown town" as the sociologist James Loewen notes in his book of the same title. In the case of Richland, at least, "who lived here" was defined largely by who was—and who wasn't—*allowed* to live there, though the "Images of America" book doesn't reveal anything about that dimension of the town's history. Readers of *Richland* with no understanding of the city's past as a sundown town would have no way of understanding why only white people lived there, and it is quite possible that the town's racial homogeneity would go largely unnoticed by many readers as they paged through the book.

According to Katie Kellet, Arcadia Publishing's director of publishing, the company's goal is to create "a nostalgic view of what life was like in that community in days gone by" (Kellet). This stated attempt at nostalgic images of the past frequently lead Arcadia's books to ignore historical conflicts, further isolating the past from the present. One example from the book *Rochester Neighborhoods* can illustrate. Like many other American cities in the 1960s, Rochester, New York (where I now teach), was rocked by urban unrest, with the most serious uprising in 1964. In many of the Arcadia books on Rochester, the topic of urban unrest is not addressed at all. In *Rochester Neighborhoods*, the reality of this unrest is confined to a single photograph of National Guard members in riot gear with Gordon Howe, the Monroe County Manager, inspecting them. All of the men are white; all of them are smiling. The riots seem to present no serious threat to the established social order. In fact, the caption notes that the Guard members were not called into action. As a result, the only photograph that deals with the riot studiously avoids the riot. If this section of the book is meant to show the historical facts of Rochester in the 1960s, the authors could have chosen images that indicated the reasons behind the growing racial tensions in

the city or the impact of the riot on the community. However, because the stated goal of Arcadia's books is to provide a nostalgic look at the past, it makes sense that troubling times tend to be ignored or else are shown through comforting images that downplay darker chapters of the community's past. This is one of the more problematic dimensions of the "Images of America" books: the company conveys local history as an experience shared through comforting, nostalgia-driven books that frequently minimize social and economic tensions.

Arcadia Publishing's success is in many ways a measure of its tight control both over the design and production of the books and its skills in marketing them. By providing readers with historical photographs drawn from thousands of archives around the country, Arcadia is able to both create and then satisfy a market for its books. To answer the guiding questions about what a place looked like and who lived there in the past, the editors of Arcadia write: "[O]ne would need to search archives, to quiz the oldest residents of the town, or to seek snippets in books on other subjects. For anyone with a thirst for history or anyone who cared about where they and their ancestors had come from, there was simply not enough out there" ("10 Years"). What the company seems to mean is that there were not enough local history books available to answer these basic questions; that without such books it would take too much effort to seek out the answers to the questions that the company has decided are the most important to ask. Arcadia recognized that there could be a market for snapshot versions of the past that would be created by and for local residents less interested in understanding the complexities of the past than in reading fun, user-friendly picture histories. By developing efficient production and marketing systems, Arcadia was in a good position to become the well-oiled machine it is today.

Explaining the success of the "Images of America" series, Steve Strunsky, a writer for the *New York Times* writes: "Arcadia is neither a nonprofit nor a vanity press. It picks up all production costs, which are kept down by using a standard format, and pays its authors modest royalties. Because of each book's limited marketability, Arcadia relies on sheer numbers of titles, which can sell several thousand copies each, to add up to a worthwhile sales volume." The company declines to reveal average sales figures, noting that the number of titles sold is partly dependent on the size of the community that the book addresses. In recent years, however, the company has sought to expand from the

regional market to begin publishing books with a more national appeal (Milliot, "Arcadia," 115). Kate Everingham, the director of sales for Arcadia Publishing, states that the company sold more than 1.5 million books in 2006, and in the first four months of 2007 sold more than 500,000 copies of the 4,000 titles published from 1993-2006 and the 246 new titles introduced up to that point in 2007 (Everingham). Authors receive an 8% royalty on the \$19.99 price that is standard for the "Images of America" books (Dinan 53).

Strunsky's description of Arcadia's model for success is revealing. He notes the company's priorities of keeping down production costs and relying on large sales of low cost goods in order to maximize profits. Arcadia manages all dimensions of its product, from controlling issues of format and content to handling its own distribution and sales. Indeed, in some respects, Arcadia's business approach reflects what George Ritzer calls "the McDonaldization of society." Ritzer lists four key elements that define McDonaldization—efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control through nonhuman technology (Ritzer 15-17)—all of which are evident in Arcadia's books. Like many franchise businesses in which consumers expect a recognizable, predictable product or service no matter which part of the country or world they are in, readers of Arcadia Publishing's books can expect a very familiar product, whether they are reading *The Historic Core of Los Angeles* or *Davenport: Jewel of the Mississippi*.

Arcadia's production process directly affects the content of the books it publishes. Because Arcadia Publishing places tight limits both on the content and the scope of the books it publishes, it narrows the range of options open to the books' authors of how best to address their subjects. Arcadia is able to reduce typesetting and printing costs by limiting text to brief introductions and image captions, using a standardized cover design, and mandating a strict limit of exactly 128 pages. The standardized format, page length, and cover design allow readers to quickly identify the series. Significantly, the same standardization also suggests that all of the books are of equal quality, despite the facts that not all of the books are written by trained historians, and that "Arcadia Publishing does not have an internal peer review or fact-checking process" (Kellet). By keeping the price of the books under 20 dollars and promoting the large number of images to be found inside, Arcadia promises readers an affordable and detailed tour through local

history. Finally, the technologies used to quickly, efficiently, and affordably print a large number of titles constrain the range of methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of local history.

Despite the huge numbers of titles and the geographic range of the series, both of which would suggest a need for diversity, standardization is the most salient features of the books. (Looking at a stack of Arcadia books on my desk, my six-year-old son quite sensibly asked me if the same person wrote all of them.) This standardization serves as a built-in marketing strategy for a company that until recently relied almost completely on local publicity and word-of-mouth to promote its books. Once a person knows what an “Images of America” book looks like, it becomes easy to spot them in town after town. Each book’s front cover has a single full-bleed sepia-toned photograph that can also be found inside the book (though without the sepia toning) and that frequently shows residents engaged in some kind of social activity such as dancing, attending a parade, or working. A red-bordered black Palladian banner at the top provides the book’s title, and a smaller banner at the bottom names the author. The cover photograph continues across the spine and onto the back cover, the remainder of which is black and contains a brief summary of the book, an image of the state with the location of the community marked with a red star, and the state flag. The book design seems intended to promote pride in local heritage. The sepia toning is a metonym for “the olden days,” which for many Americans is nostalgically recalled as a simpler era when community bonds were stronger than they are today. Whether or not intentional, the standardized theme continues within the pages of the “Images of America” series as different communities can come to look almost indistinguishable, with one street-car scene virtually interchangeable with the next.

The nostalgic nature of Arcadia’s visions of the past is reinforced by the other book series the company publishes (e.g. “Images of Baseball” and “Images of Rail”) as well as by the company’s website, which was awarded the 2006 “Best Publishing Website” award from the Web Marketing Association. When visitors first visit the website, they are greeted with slow violin music that sounds as though it had been lifted from a Ken Burns documentary. As the music plays, a company motto appears: “Within every photograph, in every American city, are stories to be told.” The words fade out, and a series of photographs appear in slide-show format. Each photograph is sepia-toned, and each appears to be

from the 1920s or earlier. The first image shows a group of travelers who have pulled to the side of the road on a hill overlooking a small town, gathered in and around their large convertible to gaze down at the pastoral scene below. The second looks down on a busy city street filled with Model T’s and trolley cars. The third is taken from the stands of a baseball game, the audience a sea of straw hats and white shirts. The fourth is an up-close view of a trolley car on a city street. The fifth shows a group of workers standing in front of a row of wagons that have just been made in the large warehouse behind them. The images provide a quick glimpse of what readers can expect to find in the “Images of America” books. From rural idyll to maturing town or city, the books show growth and change, and celebrate both hard work and leisure activities.

When the slide show is complete, the website allows viewers to click on a map of the United States in order to do a geographic search for titles in their area. Viewers can also choose which series of books they want to browse through. The website’s sepia toning is consistent throughout, and the words “heritage” and “nostalgia” are used frequently to frame the way Arcadia views the past. The different series are oriented to different market segments—railway buffs, sports enthusiasts, etc. Pleasant reveries of the past are promoted over scholarly rigor or methodologically grounded interpretations of historical photographs. Bucolic (indeed, Arcadian) scenes of supposedly simpler days of yore are showcased, accumulating into an extensive catalog of historical images that show a great deal, but actually reveal little about the past.

As noted earlier, Arcadia’s standardization of history continues on the insides of its books as well. Each book in the “Images of America” series is 128 pages in length and includes an introduction and multiple chapters organized by the author. As might be expected, the chapters frequently are organized spatially (particularly in books dealing with large or medium-sized cities), moving readers in and around the community, taking a look at the passage of time as it appeared in specific neighborhoods. Some authors maintain tight control on chronology along with their spatial organization, moving forward through time page-by-page, while other authors move back and forth more freely through time, preferring a thematic approach over a strict chronology. With either approach, however, the emphasis in the “Images of America” series is on appearance, with the implicit reasoning that to

know what a place looked like in the past is to know the history of that place. This spatial arrangement is a key feature of the books and reflects the “who” and “where” questions that guide the series. Arcadia places little emphasis on explaining how the past had any influence on the present; the books I’ve looked at frequently ignore how and why things happened in the past, and what the consequences were of political, economic, social, or cultural shifts. In this sense, the books are actually quite ahistorical, presenting the past as a series of things that happened seemingly in a vacuum.

The standardization of the books makes it easy for readers to assume that all of the history contained within is roughly co-equal in terms of chronology, significance of historical events, accuracy, and quality of writing, despite the very real variations in each of these. Every town, neighborhood, or topic is worth 128 pages of information, no matter what. Thus, Levittown, at slightly more than 50 years old, merits precisely as much attention as Santa Fe, which has been inhabited for several hundred years, and Gettysburg’s history is no more significant than that of Gilroy, California. It is tempting to view such an approach as a laudable democratization of history, but Arcadia’s reasons for such a radical leveling of the past stem largely from a desire to manage costs through standardization.

While it is true that any town can have multiple titles written about it, and one can argue that these titles build larger portraits of larger places, individual titles stand alone, and little effort is made to indicate that any book is only a partial story for a particular city and that readers should buy additional books for a more complete history. Indeed, because the format of the “Images of America” books provides both a spatial and a chronological tour of the subject, readers may be left with the impression that a coherent and complete story has been told in each book. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that a small town couldn’t have multiple titles written about it as well, just as long as there are enough photographs to fill the pages and enough authors willing to write the captions. The only limit to Arcadia’s books is the limit of the marketplace—as long as there are people willing to write them and buy them, new titles will continue to be published.

The format and the design of Arcadia Publishing’s books raise important questions about the way the company approaches history; the uses of historical photographs in its books deserve even closer scrutiny.

Upon first glance, historical photographs seem like natural paths into the past because, as the Lawrence Levine has written, every photograph “seems to be the quintessential objective document—reality in black and white—and thus makes a greater claim on our credulity than other types of documents” (269). Most people are inclined to believe what they see in photographs, particularly older photographs that record a time before computer software made image manipulation as simple as it is today. Given that “[m]ost of Arcadia’s customers are over 45 years old and somewhat less immersed in technology than younger Web surfers” (Dyszel), it is likely that the Arcadia’s main market readership is even more trusting in photographic images than younger readers would be. In addition, the captions that are written by the books’ authors help anchor meanings in the photographs and are offered as objective statements of fact and not as the subjective interpretations of the images by the authors, which they routinely are.

In some ways, the use of photographs in the “Images of America” series echoes the use of photographs in pictorial histories in the late nineteenth century as recounted by Gregory Pfitzer in his book, *Picturing the Past*. The criticisms leveled one hundred years ago remain appropriate today:

Given the potential for manipulation and artifice in the production of photographic images, it is no wonder that many questioned whether photos were really any more useful than pictorial illustrations had been in the pursuit of accuracy in the study of the past[....]At least with illustrations, the reader of pictorial works knew that “some interpretive recreation” was implied and that the illustrator of historical events acted self-consciously at some level as a representational artist. With the photograph, the assumption of objectivity gave observers the false security that they were in the presence of images that required no interpretation, when, in fact, the camera’s seeming “impartiality” imposed more analytic demand than less. (225)

Pfitzer goes on to note that the “uses and misuses of photographs remind us that, as with pictorial illustrations, the context for the transfer of visual information is crucial to an understanding of its meaning” (228), and critics in the late nineteenth century were quick to complain about

the too-casual use of photographs in historical texts. For much of the twentieth century, pictorial histories receded into the background, but they became prominent once again in the latter decades of the century. In the 1970s, photographic histories were published widely in the nostalgia ushered in by the nation's Bicentennial celebration, leading historians and cultural theorists to point out the challenges of using photographs as historical resources. In his own discussion of the "beguiling" nature of photographs, Levine points out that "[p]hotographic images, like statistics, do not lie, but like statistics the truths they communicate are elusive and incomplete" (262).

Writing about nineteenth-century photographs of the American West, the historian Martha Sandweiss outlines a range of theoretical and methodological concerns about the ways in which photographs are put to use to illustrate, describe, or understand the past. Echoing Levine's observation about the inherent subjectivity of historical photographs, Sandweiss notes that historical photographs are "deeply selective sorts of evidence," and points out that, in addition to the photographers' selection, many important dimensions of the past, including "economic forces, political ideologies, [and] long-term weather cycles are not easily photographed" (327). Again, such dimensions of the past are largely absent in Arcadia's books, confined—at most—to brief asides in captions of photographs that show something else. Sandweiss writes that photographs "can evoke a sense of familiarity that belies the essential unknowability of the past" (10) an apt description of the problematic nature of Arcadia Publishing's reliance upon historical photographs.

Sandweiss argues that in addition to considering the subject found in photographs, historians have a responsibility to approach historical photographs both *in* history and *through* history. That is, historians need to make an effort to understand "the circumstances of [a photograph's] making, the photographer's intent, the public function of the image, [and] the ways in which it was received and understood by contemporary audiences." At the same time, historians need to pay attention to the life of a photograph once divorced from its original context as it "might have moved into archives or attics, museums or scrapbooks, and the ways in which it has been reinterpreted over time" (9). In the "Images of America" books I have examined, there is little apparent effort to understand photographs either *in* or *through* history. In a related vein, important issues about a community's past are necessarily left unexam-

ined if no photographs show them. Moreover, photographs are routinely presented as easily understood documents that reveal some essential truth about the subject without much more than a brief caption of context.

Two examples from three of the books published about Rochester will serve to illustrate how Arcadia's visions of the past play out in one particular place. In many ways, Rochester is a fairly typical medium-sized northeastern city. Its economy boomed through the late nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century but has since been in decline. Its population has also shrunk, with workers moving into successively farther suburbs or to the newer Sunbelt cities. The declining fortunes of cities like Rochester can easily provoke nostalgia for a past seen either as more prosperous or more unified, and the "Images of America" books published about Rochester seem intended to strike these "mystic chords of memory." The titles about the city include *Rochester's Downtown*, *Rochester's Dutchtown*, *Rochester's South Wedge*, *Rochester's Lakeside Resorts and Amusement Parks*, *Rochester Labor and Leisure*, *Rochester's Leaders and their Legacies*, and *Rochester's Historic East Avenue District*.

The photographer Allan Sekula states, "the photograph, as it stands alone, presents merely the *possibility* of meaning" (Sekula 7). Indeed, in the "Images of America" books, photographs can talk on a multitude of meanings, depending on how they are used. In more than one instance, an individual photograph appears in multiple books written about Rochester, with different authors putting the photograph to different uses. For example, in *Rochester Labor and Leisure*, Donovan Shilling captions a photograph of a row of riverfront buildings: "Perched above the Genesee River is this row of venerable Front Street shops. One shop owned by Archie Lipsky Poultry, at 60 Front Street, had the advantage of the river for disposing of chicken feathers. The Reynolds Arcade and the former Genesee Community Bank Building are in the background" (24). The book doesn't specifically say that the poultry shop is included in the row of buildings shown in the photograph, or whether the shop was even in business when the photograph was taken, but that kind of historical veracity is not deemed necessary. Instead, the photograph is used to visually build an anecdote about the specific activity of a single business owner. It may be that Shilling wanted to recount the anecdote about Archie Lipsky and had to find an image to anchor the story. As it

is presented, there is no clear connection between Shilling's text and what the image actually shows.

Shirley Cox Husted and Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck use the same photograph in a slightly cropped format for a very different purpose in *Rochester Neighborhoods*: "Riverside tenements demonstrate the constant need for better housing for the poor. As new buildings are erected, areas with older structures eventually become low-rent areas where absentee landlords neglect to improve their deteriorating property" (37). Their approach is more sociological than is Shilling's, and their caption hints at a historically grounded struggle between tenants and landlords for acceptable housing at affordable prices. Nevertheless, Husted and Rosenberg-Naparsteck are constrained from diving very far into this analysis. For one, the emphasis on heritage over historical analysis routinely seen in the "Images of America" books may present obstacles for authors who want to spend some of the limited page length on topics that their readers might find troubling. The formal demands of the book add another obstacle to attempts to deepen analysis. With text largely limited to the captions of photographs, authors of the "Images of America" books are frequently constrained to raising a topic, showing it briefly, and then moving on to another topic.

Reading these two Rochester captions alongside each other, the photograph's meaning becomes confused. Neither book makes a clear effort to ground the image in its original context, and, as the art historian Estelle Jussim reminds us: "Without context—the context of other photographs, the context of the economic and political realities of the time, plus *the context in verbal terms* of how the image related to those realities—there can be little chance that a single picture can convey[...]its intended meaning" (Jussim 110). Is the photograph used in these two books one of thriving—albeit precariously perched—commercial buildings, or is it a photograph of dilapidated housing? Is the photograph quaint or is it troubling? Are the buildings in the background to be seen only as names, or are we to read them as evidence of patterns of urban growth and decline? The answer, of course, depends on which Arcadia book one reads. There are still other, equally important, questions that go answered. Who took the photograph? When was it taken? Why was it taken?

Even if it is impossible to trace the original context of this photograph, there are established methodological approaches to the study of

historical photographs of buildings and street scenes, as well as to professional portraits, to newspaper photographs, and to the amateur snapshots that make up the bulk of the "Images of America" books. In his 1984 study of urban photography, *Silver Cities*, Peter Bacon Hales provides a useful framework for understanding and interpreting many of the kinds of historical photographs found in the pages of the "Images of America" series. Hales points out that photographers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries "defined and ordered their contemporaries' understanding of the urban environment, its perils and potentials. Their vision of the city became the heritage of modern America." In order to accurately understand historical photographs it is important to understand these photographers because, as Hales points out, they "were cultural messengers, and their messages both reflected and defined how Americans saw their cities" (3).

Recognizing that all photographs are the result of tensions and negotiations between their makers and their intended audience, that different kinds of photographs are made for different reasons, and that all photographs are artifacts of the technological capabilities of their day, it becomes clear that the photographs used in the "Images of America" books are far from being the objective, transparent windows into the past that they claim. In the time they were made; in the time when they found their ways into the archives from which the authors drew them; and in their current use in the books, the photographs remain embedded in an ongoing struggle for the power to represent, and, as a result, to shape Americans' understanding of the past. Hales goes on to argue that the "urban photographic tradition in America had been born out of a tremendous cultural need—the need for an essentially agrarian republic to come to terms with the process of industrialization and urbanization which was rapidly engulfing it and threatening the myths which sustained and defined the culture" (280). Significantly, it is this same transition from rural to urban that Arcadia Publishing uses in its website, as I described above. Far from presenting such a shift as full of cultural uncertainty, in the "Images of America" books that period of American history is now comfortably remote and useful for a marketable nostalgia.

By treating historical photographs as objective statements about the past and that they elucidate in their brief captions, the authors of the "Images of America" books have wide latitude in influencing how readers will understand the images. Authors also anchor how they want the

photographs to be understood by the ways in which they sequence the photographs. For example, Shilling precedes the photograph discussed above with an image that shows the façade of a Front Street business and a caption noting that the street “had enormous character,” and he follows the photograph with another façade view from Front Street. In his book, then, the photograph comes to be understood as something like a topographical view, a simple recording of an urban block, Front Street seen from behind and from the front, a collection of businesses that Shilling colors with his captions.

Husted and Rosenberg-Naparsteck also use the photograph as an indicator of the city’s riverfront heritage, but with more emphasis on the social impact of urban change. In *Rochester Neighborhoods*, the image that precedes the one in question is a much more recent photograph of a tour boat coursing through the Genesee River. The subsequent photograph is of another row of dilapidated buildings in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Similar to the language used in the caption for the Front Street photograph, the authors note: “Buildings near the canal were among Rochester’s first buildings and were therefore the first to deteriorate after the canal was relocated.” Together, then, the sequence of photographs and their accompanying captions tells readers that Rochester’s early history was tied to the Genesee River and the Erie Canal, that the older districts deteriorated because the canal was relocated, and that in recent years the main role of the river and canal is to serve tourism. That tourism has become one of the ways that civic leaders have tried to stanch the recent economic bleeding of industrial cities like Rochester goes unexplored here.

As this analysis of the use of a single photograph in two books makes clear, historical photographs in the “Images of America” books serve primarily as visual examples or evidence for author-chosen meaning. On the surface this is not surprising, given both the readiness with which many people embrace the notion of photographic objectivity, and the implicit trust that forms the basis of the relationship between the author and her or his readers. In a supposedly historical context, however, the result is the weakening of the photograph’s usefulness for achieving a richer understanding of the past. After all, if a photograph can mean whatever the author wants it to mean, then it doesn’t really mean anything at all. With this in mind, it becomes evident that despite marketing the books as pictorial histories, the information that gives any

real historical meaning at all in the “Images of America” books is primarily textual, relegating the photographs to illustrations of the points that the authors make in their captions. The captions are necessarily short, however, leaving the authors in a bind: neither the images nor the text allow them to go into significant historical analysis because both the images and their captions are largely “snapshot” descriptions.

Arcadia Publishing tries to downplay this tension between photograph and text in its promotional and marketing materials. As one of the company’s flyers states: “Each book is complete with over 200 rare, vintage images from the early days of photography chronicling a particular city, town or region. Each photograph is accompanied by in-depth historical information” (“Images of America”). The use of the words “rare” and “vintage” here suggests a precious quality to the images and, by extension, to the books themselves; this description, however, is a bit misleading, and is used primarily as a marketing device. As seen in the photograph of the tour boat in the Genesee River, recently made photographs are routinely printed alongside older photographs, sometimes juxtaposed to make a rhetorical statement about the changes found in the community, and sometimes shown in a manner demonstrating continuity and enduring community values. For example, *Richland* includes many photographs of high school activities from the 1970s, and shows some individuals that I recall from my own childhood. The book even includes photographs from as recent as 2001—hardly the stuff of “rare, vintage images.” The books on Rochester similarly include very recent photographs alongside the much older photographs.

Reading Arcadia’s books soon reveals that the promotional claim of “in-depth historical information” accompanying each photograph exaggerates the rigorousness of the historical methodology employed by some of the authors. As noted previously, Arcadia Publishing does not fact-check the books it publishes, nor does it engage in an external peer-review process, as is done with scholarly history books. As seen in the photograph used both by Shilling and by Husted and Rosenberg-Naparsteck, the anecdotal approach taken by many authors frequently turns to speculation that, while perhaps lively and enjoyable, has little to do with historical analysis. To give another example, Shilling writes about a photograph of a group of young women posed by an early model automobile in his book *Rochester’s Lakeside Resorts and Amusement Parks*: “The dancing, partying, and great bands attracted many of the area’s

lasses to the Elmheart's dance hall or the ballroom of the Manitou Beach Park. This trio of young ladies can't wait for the evening festivities to begin. Perhaps they each found some male companion who enjoyed ukulele music" (49). Shilling's caption is pure speculation and has no grounding in the photograph itself beyond what Shilling has projected onto it. Employing a voice that seems intended to spark pleasant recollections of supposedly more innocent times, Shilling presumes to know what the women are thinking and feeling. However, as Martha Sandweiss reminds us: "It is easy to imagine that we understand the expression on a subject's face[...]And yet, of course, we cannot. The instinctive empathy we can feel for photographic subjects can push us to assume more than we can truly know about the actual subject of the image" (6). Shilling cannot even say for certain where the photograph was made, but he uses it to represent a particular kind of place and assigns the women a particular role to play in the evening he has imagined. Shilling's breezy captions may make for fun imaginings, but they hardly qualify as history.

These are important matters despite the temptation to smile and shrug at the laxness of this kind of history. Arcadia Publishing has an increasingly prominent role in shaping the way that many Americans understand the histories of their local communities. The company's steady growth suggests that Arcadia will not be slowing down as a publishing phenomenon anytime soon. Indeed, it may give rise to competitors following similar approaches to the past, further complicating the roles played by archival photographs in contemporary pictorial histories. Moreover, the notion of "archival photographs" may become increasingly complicated as a result of Arcadia's success. While the "Images of America" books draw from existing archives of photographs, the series is becoming an archive in its own right. That is, while each book in the series is its own product, the uniformity of the books and the expansiveness of the title list make it likely that students and historians will turn to the books as ready sources of historical photographs for further study. Indeed, Arcadia Publishing may well become one of the largest archives of historical photographs in the United States.

The historian, Robin Kelsey, writes: "The producers of archives have [...] claimed and defended the completeness, authenticity, and reliability of their holdings" (5). While Arcadia Publishing has not yet reached a level of "completeness" (in terms of amassing photographic histories of every community in the United States), their business model leans in that

direction. Moreover, the company already suggests that their books offer authenticity and reliability. This is a problem. As the artist and writer, Shawn Michelle Smith, writes:

Even as it purports simply to supply evidence, or to document historical occurrences, the archive maps the cultural terrain it claims to describe. In other words, the archive constructs the knowledge it would seem only to register or make evident [...] Once an archive is compiled, it makes a claim on history; it exists as a record of the past. The archive is a vehicle of memory, and as it becomes the trace on which an historical record is founded, it makes some people, places, things, ideas, and events visible, while relegating others, through its signifying absences, to invisibility. (7-8)

From this, we can see that while the "Images of America" books can be quite successful in evoking pleasant ideas of the past, Arcadia Publishing limits the range of historical understanding available to the books' readers. As a result, the "Images of America" books may, in fact, erase the past as much as they illuminate it.

Note

1. Since writing the above in 2006, the company's website has changed.

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