

# BERT CALL; From Farm Boy to Distinguished Photographer

1965

The late Bert L. Call was an enthusiastic promoter and contributor of pictures and anecdotes to the proposed local Historical Society; presently sponsored by the Jaycees. Because of his help and interest, the following article, written largely by Frank Spizuoco, is submitted in his memory.



1866 - BERT L. CALL - 1965

Edwin Call, father of Bert, was of Scottish ancestry and came to Exeter from Dresden, Maine. His wife was Jane White, daughter of Samuel K. White, chair factory owner from Dexter and a direct descendant of Peregrine White, who was born on the Mayflower.

Our sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln, died on April 15, 1865. The news of his death was spread throughout the land but news traveled slowly in those days and it was not until a long time later that the small village of East Exeter, Maine received word that our President had been assassinated.

The Call family was expecting their second child. If a boy, they thought, it would be fitting to name him after our beloved President! On May 16, 1866, the Call family was blessed with a bouncing baby boy. The boy was named Albert Lincoln Call.

The family resided on a farm where the boys as children slept in a trundle bed in use in those days. As they grew up they learned to work on the farm and to hunt and fish. They learned to love and appreciate nature which lasted them all their lives. The three boys went to school at the Oak Hill Schoolhouse, a long walk from their home, and especially hard in winter.

The Call family continued to live in the old original farmhouse until Leslie, the older brother married and raised a family. Needing a larger home, the old house was moved off and served as a sheep barn for many years. A much larger and more comfortable house was moved from an adjoining farm and served for many years as the home of four generations of the family.

The farm was large. Hundreds of barrels of apples were shipped to Boston markets. A large maple grove furnished wonderful maple syrup and honey was also sold. A large herd of Jersey cattle, a flock of sheep, which furnished wool for sale, and produce from the large gardens meant a lot of hard work, even with hired help.

As the men in the family grew older and the work increased, it was deemed best to sell. So the old home, the scene of so many happy gatherings of the clan, was sold.

Several years ago, the farmhouse and all the buildings were destroyed by fire. A few grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and

great-great-grandchildren, scattered here and there, are all left of a fine old family.

1885 at the age of nineteen, (Bert) Lincoln Call went to Bar Harbor for summer work.

His first time away from home he found employment at Seal Harbor working for the Clement Brothers, owners of the Seaside House. Here, he carried the mail to the guests and transported passengers with a buckboard. This was all right for the summer, but what was he to do with himself in the future? What should he choose for an occupation? He wasn't needed at the farm. There were other brothers to help his father.

As young boy, Bert thought he would like, to be a carpenter or mechanic. He had tried employment at Fay and Scott and also at Wood and Bishops in Bangor, but they didn't need help.

While in Bangor, Bert met his cousin, Ellen Southard, who was marking crayon portraits for Harry Bassett in Dexter. Mr. Bassett lived on Dustin Hill and had an extensive portrait business. Many of these 16x20 crayon portraits may still be seen in our rural homes even today. It was suggested to Bert that he come to Dexter and work for A. G. Fassett, a photographer who was at present seeking an apprentice.

On February 8, 1886, Albert Lincoln Call met A. G. Fassett, photographer. Little did Bert realize that his meeting would start a career that would last sixty years and bring much enjoyment and happiness to the people of Dexter and to himself.

Bert now began to learn the photography business. He was to serve apprenticeship for three months and pay Mr. Fassett \$25 for the privilege. As it happened, Mr. Fassett was so pleased with Bert's work that he paid him \$8 a week and would not accept the \$25.

At this time Bert boarded at the Daniel Flynt house on Upper Main Street for \$3 per week, room and board. After his apprenticeship period was over, Bert stayed on as Mr. Fassett's assistant.

By November, 1886 Mr. Fassett decided to sellout and Bert was approached about buying the business. Fassett wanted \$1,000 for the building, fixtures, and the business. The building was between the Grange and the old T. & K. Store (Don's Texaco). This was a good chance to become self-employed, but where was he to get that amount of cash? Bert had no available funds to even make a down payment.

As fate would have it, Bert had been acquainted with L. T. Waterman, who worked at Eldridge's Lumber Mill on Grove St. Why, he would loan Bert the money! They would become partners in the business.

Mr. Waterman was sixty years old at the time and wished to retire from the vigorous work at the mill. He desired to make picture frames and do some outdoor photography; work that better suited his age and strength.

As partners they purchased the picture framing business from Warren Carr's Hardware Shop. Mr. Waterman would make the frames and do the delivering

and Bert would make the photographs and do the finishing work. In this way the \$500 Bert owed was completely paid back to Mr. Waterman and he, eventually became sole proprietor in 1890.

Soon after coming to Dexter he met and married Carrie Safford. They were married in 1888 by Rev. Clifford of the Methodist Church for whom they named their only son, Edwin Clifford Call.

The studio flourished. By 1918, it was moved to the Morrison Block and Bert had taken his son into the business.

In 1924 their assets had reached \$20,000. Then disaster struck. Fire swept through the studio from the ceiling above. On the previous day bank president Jim Atwood had had some work done in the attic on the bank's alarm system. It was possible that some electric wires had caused the fire. Priceless negatives of the past fifty years of Dexter's history were lost along with some of the most modern photographic equipment used in New England.

Insurance would yield \$1,000 to help restore the studio. Bert's son, Bob, now looked around for another place to re-open the business. The E. K. (Eastman Kodak) in Boston offered equipment on credit. The Dexter Club offered their dance hall for a temporary studio.

Now an old friend made a proposition, John Springall had a watch and jewelry shop in the Witherall Block and offered to sell it. Bert had known John since they first became acquainted in 1886 at a Knights of Pythias dance at the town hall.

But where to raise the money? As knowledge of a possible transaction between Bert and John Springall became known, many of Bert's friends got together the large sum of \$5,000 and gave it to him to buy the business. Now besides a photography business, Mr. Springall's line of jewelry and fine gift items were added. Business flourished and they were able to completely repay their friends within a few years.

But hard times again hit not only for Bert and his son, but for the whole world. The 1929 depression was here, business was extremely bad. They were forced to borrow on their insurance policies in order to stay in business.

By World War II better times were here and the business was booming again. In 1944 they had everything paid off, owned their home and business free and clear, and had money in the bank.

Bert was 78 years old and his son, Bob, was working for Rustcraft Co. At this time the business was sold to Stan Blake, and Bert went into retirement.

While the Studio was his main interest and livelihood, Bert at one time raised canaries and had the agency for Columbia bicycles.

His love for nature showed in the success he had with flowers. He had a small greenhouse and his gardens were beautiful.

For several years, he served as official photographer for the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad and this gave him the opportunity to combine business with the thing he loved best to do, go into the deep woods of Maine, take the Allagash trip, climb Mt. Katahdin, explore many lakes and take the beautiful pictures to be found in "The Maine Woods".

To sit down by a camp fire and eat a meal by a stream from which trout had just been caught, hot biscuits baked before the open fire and wonderful coffee all prepared by Bert himself was something never to be forgotten. He was also an excel-

lent home cook. His pies, angel cake, and special molasses candy, pulled on a big hook in the kitchen, is a happy memory for many old friends.



The Call Studio Crew, 1924, from left, Bob Call, William Call, John Springall, Alice Maxfield, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Call, Ruth Slater and Marion Call Gordon.

For seventy-nine years Dexter was blessed with a citizen of many talents and abilities. He had witnessed the administrations of twenty of our country's presidents.

Bert was one of the founders of the Dexter Club in 1890. He was Chief of the Fire Department in 1907 and 1908, served on the school board and as town assessor, and was a member of the K. OF P.

Bert was a man respected and loved by all who knew him. As President of the Dexter Club, President of the Elkinstown Club, member of the Favor and Haines Comedy Company, his help and ideas were of immeasurable value. His services as make-up man and for stage settings were always of the best. The Centennial Play, "Nan the Mascot", was a great success and the role of Jimsey Frackett played by Bert was one of the highlights.

He did everything in moderation, always ready to lend a helping hand. He was a true friend, a gentleman, one of the finest.

#### NOTE:

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*"I was in my twenties when I met Bert and I learned a lot of Dexter history listening to him; he was a natural story teller. You could say he had a kind of serenity about him, too. His life was marked by personal tragedy but his attitude was: It's God's way and I'm going to live with it. He had a wisdom and strength I admired. Frank Spizuoco believes that Bert Call never realized the value of his own work. The picture that emerges from the tapes, from the remarkable photographs, and from the recollections of the people who knew him is of a man who was part poet, part philosopher, and not much concerned about commerce and the accumulation of wealth. 'He never sent bills to his customers. They'll pay when they can, he'd say. Perhaps that kind of serenity helped him focus on his art.'"*

*-Frank Spizuoco, as quoted by Richard Sprague for an article in Maine line (Fall 1988)*