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Photos give clear picture of early York County life

On Oct. 27, 1908, the Yorkville Enquirer carried a sketch of the life of John R. Schorb on his 90th birthday. The article concluded: "... he is in remarkably fine physical condition . . . His mental condition is perfect."

Nine days later, the newspaper carried Schorb's obituary.

Schorb had a remarkable life. He was born in the Grand Duchy of Baden, Germany, in 1818 and came alone to America at the age of 16. He wandered for four years and then enrolled at Hamilton College in Rochester, N.Y. At Hamilton, he became a student of chemistry professor Charles Avery, who had worked with Louis Daguerre, the inventor of the early photographic process known as daguerreotype.

Avery was most interested in the chemistry of photography, a complicated process using highly polished silver surfaces on a copper plate that was sensitized to light by exposing it to iodine fumes.

Schorb mastered the chemistry but was most fascinated by the pictures that resulted.

It has been estimated that of all the daguerreotypes still in existence, 95 percent are portraits. Margaret Gist of York once observed that while Schorb also made portraits, he had made hundreds of daguerreotypes of York's homes.

After college, Schorb became a traveling photographer. Eventually, he came south to Charleston and Columbia. In Columbia he was offered a job teaching at the famous Mount Zion Institute in Winnsboro. That was in 1848. He



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*Nearby
History*

stayed in Winnsboro for five years.

Offered a teaching job in the Yorkville Female Seminary, he accepted. He lived the remainder of his long life on Liberty Street. As long as he taught (until 1869), photography was merely a hobby, but when the Female Academy closed he built a photographic studio in which he worked until his death in 1908.

He became a good citizen — among other things, serving on the town council, voting in every election and playing the organ for the Presbyterian Church where he became an elder.

On the back of some of his postcard-sized pictures, Schorb printed "Artistic photographer in all its branches." Besides regular photographs, he also turned out kaleidoscope pictures along with hand-tinted duplicate pictures, side-by-side, made for viewing in a hand-held stereopticon device that gave a 3-D look.

Schorb also printed cameo-sized portraits of young ladies superimposed on the center of open roses and dahlias.

Surviving are pictures of babies in ornate carriages, a doll in a carriage, girls with bicycles, a young boy holding his air rifle, Union soldiers in the Federal occupation army of the early 1870s, and

a 2-year-old wearing glasses. There is a wonderful picture of a boy in his best suit sitting on a box in front of a painted backdrop showing a stream. The boy is holding a fishing pole with two very real-looking, good-sized fish beside him.

Another interesting photograph was made in Schorb's back yard (backyard pictures are extremely rare). This one shows the Schorb children and their black nurse in front of a child's playhouse built of plank with the name of a piano company plainly showing.

A.M. Grist, editor of the Yorkville Enquirer, wrote that Schorb kept duplicates of almost every photograph he ever made. "It is certain that he preserved many daguerreotypes, and the thousands of photographs and views in his collection constitute a most interesting and valuable pictorial history of the town and community."

Many of Schorb's photographs were placed in the York Library for preservation. Also, there are 190 glass plate negatives, daguerreotypes and tintypes in the Winthrop University Archives, a gift of Schorb's great-granddaughter, Mary Kell Wade of Great Falls, a great-granddaughter of John R. Schorb.

Twenty of the negatives had been enlarged and framed. They hang on the wall outside the Archives on the basement level of Dacus Library.

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