

Article and photos courtesy of the Vermont Historical Society (gift of Roger H. Wildt)/Written by Paul Carnahan, librarian of the Vermont Historical Society



VERMONT HISTORY

H.L. Chapman

Vermont Photographer

BEFORE DIGITAL IMAGE files, there were rolls of plastic photographic film; before film, there were glass-plate negatives. In those early days of negative-based photography, a light-sensitive layer of silver salts was spread over a piece of glass to capture photographic images. Dry glass plates were a popular medium for photographers in Vermont and elsewhere from the 1880s through the 1910s. One photographer who used this technology, even after it had been supplanted by newer techniques, was H.L. Chapman of Windham, Vermont. Chapman's output during his lifetime, 1875–1967, was astounding for its quantity and quality. No one knows how many photographs he took, but the collections of two historical societies, the Vermont Historical Society (VHS) and the Historical Society of Windham County, contain approximately 1,500 of his plates.

The images of H.L. Chapman document the landscape and people of the northwestern corner of Windham County and the neighboring, rural towns of Bennington County as Ver-



Studio portrait of Henry L. Chapman.



A hunter, with cigarette in hand, is seen giving his dog instructions. Even without color photography, Chapman could capture the essence of a season in Vermont.

mont entered the 20th century. Chapman's photographs at the Vermont Historical Society capture not only his hometown of Windham but also Grafton, Jamaica, Londonderry, Peru, Townshend, and Westminster, plus a few others. Some of these images survive today on postcards printed by Chapman, but the original glass-plate negatives with their large size are images of amazing clarity and originality. Archivists and historians today can enlarge scans from the original glass plates and enter Vermont as it was more than 100 years ago.

Henry Luther Chapman, known as Harry or H.L., was born in Hanover, Maine in 1875, the son of Luther Bourne Chapman and Amelia Martha Howard, a native of Windham, Vermont. Soon after Harry's birth, the young family moved to the small town of Windham (population 536 in 1880) where Harry and his sister were raised. Luther was a farmer, landowner, and officeholder. He served as postmaster, town clerk, town treasurer, and state legislator. He directed the church choir and gave music lessons. Luther and Amelia wrote and published music together, endowing their children with an appreciation for the arts.

The history of Harry's schooling is unclear, but, at some point, he made his way down to New York City where he worked first as a milk wagon driver for Madison Square Dairy and later as a bread truck driver. Early in his adult life he had one foot in New York, working for agricultural operations, while keeping the other in Vermont, working in photography and building a home.

Harry seems to have learned photography under the tutelage of Charlie Wellman of Chester, Vermont. The September 25, 1896 *Vermont Phoenix*, published in Brattleboro, the largest town in Windham County, includes



Harry Chapman built this house in Windham from plans that he purchased in the early 1900s.



A group of schoolchildren pose with their teacher for a portrait. The need to stay still for the required time exposure of the plate may explain the stern expressions of the children, many of whom went to school barefoot.



Hunting scenes were common subjects for H.L. Chapman. Here two hunters pose with their deer at Mountain Grove Farm in Windham.



Harry Chapman passed on his love of hunting to his son Howard, seen here with a deer displayed on the fender of his car, a 1932 Ford sedan.

a notice that Harry had formed a partnership with Charlie in Chester. The older man specialized in studio portraits while Harry was more interested in nature scenes. To underscore this specialization, in 1908 the *Brattleboro Reformer* noted, “H.L. Chapman, landscape photographer from Windham, was in this place [Rawsonville, a village of Jamaica] taking views Monday.”

In addition to working as a photographer and New York City delivery truck driver, Harry was an avid outdoorsman. As a young man, he discovered the allure of nature in Florida. According to a biography written by his grandson Bill, Harry took a steamer to Jacksonville, Florida, traveling steerage. He hunted and fished, selling the fruits of his labors to local businesses.

Harry returned home to Vermont from Florida around 1910 to be with his mother who was ill, but that did not keep him continuing to visit New York and Florida. Somehow, Harry found the time during this period to build his own home behind his father’s house in Windham, following standard house plans that he had purchased. He decorated it in a “Craftsman-like” style with William Morris-inspired wallpaper and Stickley-type furniture of his own construction.

Harry met his future wife, May Goodell, a teacher in Westminster West, Vermont in 1907. They married in 1912 when they were both 37 years old. The wedding announcement published in the *Vermont Phoenix* read, “Mr. Chapman is favorably known to many in the county as a successful photographer.” The couple moved into Harry’s house in Windham and had a son, Howard Goodell Chapman, in 1915.

In 1922, Harry’s desire to see Florida again proved too strong to ignore, so the family moved to the Sunshine State for the winter. They drove south



A young man, possibly Harry Chapman's young son, Howard, out hunting with two dogs. Carrying the bulky photographic equipment of the day into the field must have been an arduous chore.



Chapman ventured far beyond the bounds of his studio, even out onto the ice and risking the possible loss of his equipment, to take a picture of this man ice fishing.



A family dressed up for a photograph in front of their house, somewhere in Windham County. The house is unpainted, fairly typical of most country homes in Vermont in the late 19th century.



A group of men pauses while doing some logging in the back woods of Windham County...and by the looks of it are hamming it up for the photographer.

in a 1920 Franklin, camping or visiting old friends from Vermont along the way. The main route south, U.S. Route 1, was a dirt path most of the way, according to Harry's grandson. The family camped out and hunted. Harry brought his camera and took numerous photos of Florida wildlife and the countryside being cleared. (The Vermont Historical Society collection includes more than 70 photographs of Florida.) This would be Harry's final trip to Florida.

When Harry, May, and Howard returned to Vermont, they continued their country lives where they had left off. They hauled and split their own wood, baked their own bread, raised chickens, kept a cow, and tended an orchard. Harry used a horse ("famous for living to 37," according to his grandson) to help cut hay in the summer. He kept bees, made maple syrup, and sold fire insurance on the side.

Harry also sold black-and-white postcards of his photographs on consignment in local stores into the 1930s. He built a wing on his house for a studio and for developing photos; his darkroom was located under a set of stairs with a red-tinted window in one of the risers. Harry's son Howard remembers trucking postcards to local stores as a young man. The Chapmans were frugal folk according to their grandson; although they had indoor plumbing they did not get electricity until late and didn't have a telephone until their adult son insisted that they get one in the 1960s.

Like his father before him, Harry served in the Vermont legislature. He was the representative from the town of Windham in the 1917–18 term when he was 42 and again in the 1935–36 term when he was 60. It was not unusual for men from small towns to serve in the legislature for multiple terms in the period before 1965. Every town, regardless of population, had to send someone to Montpelier for



J.J. Hapgood General store and post office in Peru, Vermont, pictured in the wintertime during the 1930s, at a time when Route 11 passed directly through town.



The crossroads of Route 100 and Main Street at South Londonderry, Vermont, as it appeared in the Depression years.

the winter legislative session. When conducting the state's business, Harry stayed in the Pavilion Hotel with other legislators (see article about the Pavilion in *Vermont Magazine*, May/June 2018, pp. 80–85). Photography did not distract Harry from the state's business when he was in Montpelier; there are no photographs of Montpelier in the VHS's collection of Harry's glass-plate negatives.

Harry's grandson describes him as "an old-fashioned naturalist and conservationist." He was an avid

hunter and fisherman who kept a boat at Lowell Lake in neighboring Londonderry. He wrote articles for outdoor magazines such as *Field & Stream* and raised English pointers as hunting dogs. One of his customers and hunting companions was reportedly U.S. Senator George D. Aiken from the Windham County town of Putney.

Harry's photographs demonstrate his interests in nature and hunting and fishing. The VHS's collection includes numerous photographs of



A typical Chapman landscape photo of Londonderry, that captures the look of Vermont that inspired so many plein air artists.

dogs, men in duck blinds, and hunters displaying their deer, quail, and pheasant. Harry's landscapes are usually bucolic, with open fields in the foreground (often populated by cows or sheep), a village with a church steeple in the middle ground, and distant wooded hills. Sometimes a dirt road cuts diagonally across the scene. Harry also took pictures of rushing waterfalls deep in the forest and tranquil lakes, often adorned with a fishing boat.

Although Harry's interests leaned toward the outdoor life, he also took pictures of people, especially in front of their homes and often in large groups. He captured the people of early 20th-century, rural, southern Vermont as they wanted to be remembered. Members of family and school groups are often dressed in their finest clothes, even though several of the

boys have no shoes. In contrast to his warm, humanistic portraits, Harry's photographs of towns have no human presence. His work includes pictures of village crossroads and individual buildings, but no people inhabit these images.

H.L. Chapman's glass-plate negatives are now carefully preserved in at least two institutions. Windham County photography enthusiasts Bob LeBlond, Charlie Marchant, and Dan Hescocock printed many of the plates for the two organizations (read about them in *Vermont Magazine*, January/February 2011, pp. 17--20). These glass-plate negatives are valued for the stories that they tell about Vermont at the turn of the 20th century. H.L. Chapman left a legacy of a bygone way of life in Vermont and Florida through photographic emulsion on glass. **F**

JUST THE FACTS

The glass plates created by H.L. Chapman and prints created from them can be found at the following institutions:

Howard and Alba Leahy Library

Vermont Historical Society
60 Washington Street
Barre, VT 05641
Call (802) 479-8509, visit vermonthistory.org, or email library@vermonthistory.org.

Historical Society of Windham County

Route 30, Main Street
Newfane, VT 05345
Call (802) 365-4148, visit historicalsocietyofwindhamcounty.org, or email info@historicalsocietyofwindhamcounty.org.

Selected images by H.L. Chapman can be seen online at vermonthistory.org/virtual-vhs/photographs/h-l-chapman-glass-plate-negative-collection.