

John Runk, Photographer

The Life, Family and Legacy of John Runk, Jr.



Biography, Timeline, and Brief Family Tree

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Summer 2008

One of the most well known personages of the St. Croix Valley region of Minnesota is the Stillwater photographer John Runk. Though he was born in Wisconsin, it was on the community of Stillwater that he would make his mark, capturing photos and film from all aspects of life in the Valley. Unique amongst most of his contemporaries, Runk used his creative and inventive skills along with his desire for perfection to meticulously document the history of the St. Croix Valley in photographs. Often overshadowed by his work, Runk was a plain and eccentric man, who wished only to be remembered for the collection of photos which he left to the world.

John Runk's father, also named John, was born in Germany in March of 1830.¹ He immigrated to the United States at age 22.² By the start of the American Civil War he had settled in Wisconsin and at the onset of the war, joined the Wisconsin Volunteer Regiment as "John Rank."³ With the Volunteers, Runk helped take Missionary Ridge above Chattanooga, Tennessee in the fall of 1863, led by the then eighteen-year-old Arthur MacArthur, father of the future General Douglas MacArthur.⁴ After the war, John Runk returned to Wisconsin, where he met and married Barbara Fogel, another German immigrant nine years his junior.⁵ The couple eventually had five children that survived to

¹ Information on birth, death, and marriages were prominently from records held at the Washington County Vital Records Office.

² Year of immigration taken from the timeline constructed by Washington County Historical Society member Dean Thilgen of John Runk Jr.'s life in 2000.

³ Gaffney, Myrle. "Photographer John Runk was born 100 years ago on May 10." *Stillwater Evening Gazette*. May 9, 1978. Section 2, Page 15., Johnston, Patricia Condon. *Stillwater: Minnesota's Birthplace in Photographs by John Runk*. Afton Historical Society Press, Afton, MN: 1995., 13

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Very speculative data gleaned from Wisconsin marriage records from Ancestry.com states that there was a marriage of a "John Rank" held in Jefferson County, Wisconsin, on August 9, 1868. The bride's name was not given.

adulthood: Emma, born 1869, William, born 1871, John Jr., born 1878, Charles, born 1882, and Frank, 1884.⁶

When John Runk Jr. was born on May 10th, 1878, the family lived in a small log cabin and farmed between the towns of Spring Valley and Menomonie, Wisconsin.⁷ In 1882, when John Jr. was four, the family moved to Nebraska in an attempt to find better farming land. However, a brief period showed the state to be a dusty and hopeless land. After only a little over a year, the family packed up to move back to Wisconsin.⁸ In the fall of 1884, on the way back to Wisconsin, the Runks stopped in Stillwater, Minnesota, where John Sr. was able to find work.⁹ Instead of moving back to Menomonie, the “Runks” decided to stay in Minnesota permanently, where John Runk Jr., then only 6, would begin a relationship with the St. Croix Valley which would last well over a lifetime.¹⁰

The Runks’ first home in Stillwater was on North Second Street, below Lumber Baron Isaac Staples’ mansion. Supposedly, this house was among those historical houses moved to Taylor’s Falls in the 1960s to depict a town in the early days of the St. Croix Valley.¹¹ As a boy, John Runk did not remember attending school, learning all he knew

⁶ Data on the Runk siblings is varying and contradictory. Thilgen and his sources state that John was the “second of seven children,” Johnston calls him the fifth child of a family of four boys and two girls (13), and Gaffney claims he was the second youngest, and had two sisters and three brothers. However, records only seem to indicate Emma, William, John Jr., Charles, and Frank.

⁷ Gaffney, “Photographer John Runk...”, Johnston. . *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace in Photographs by John Runk*, 13, Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*, Nos. 339, 426.

⁸ Heaton, Meg. “Heirs to a Priceless Fortune: Stillwater’s Own John Runk” *The Fishwrapper: Complimentary Stillwater Guide*. Fall 1987, Volume 9, Number 6. Page 1, 4, 5., Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*

⁹ Heaton, “Heirs to a Priceless Fortune...”

¹⁰ The family is listed as “Rank” in Stillwater Directories and Vital Records until about 1904, afterwards they are known as Runks. The Washington County death record for sister Emma in April of 1888 lists the last name as “Rink”

¹¹ Gaffney, “Photographer John Runk...”, Johnston, *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace...*, 13, Also information from the Stillwater City Directories.

from his mother and the community.¹² At the age of thirteen, he began his first job, making metal cores in the foundry of the Minnesota Chief Thresher Company for 50¢ a day.¹³ Throughout his teen years, he continued to work for the Thresher Company, while taking a multitude of other jobs around the city. He worked in machine shops, as a forester, hunting, trapping, and fishing, and loading railroad ties onto boxcars, a job that he would later call “one of the hardest kinds of work.”¹⁴ Along with “every husky boy in the St. Croix Valley,” he worked in various stages of the lumber industry, from working in the woods, to rafting on the river and in the sawmills.¹⁵ Even from an early age, Runk exhibited interests in creativity and invention, as well as a love for the wilds of the St. Croix Valley. In his spare time he hunted and fished, and as a hobby, created wire jewelry which he would sell at local fairs and carnivals.¹⁶

Runk’s interest in photography also became apparent during his teen years. Friend Tom Curtis later said that Runk always wanted to take what he called “pitchers,” using his inventiveness to build a box camera when he couldn’t afford to buy one.¹⁷ When he was about twenty, Lewis Kuhn, a Stillwater Photographer, took his portrait. Runk became so fascinated by the mechanics of the camera that he decided to try the profession.¹⁸ The next year, 1899, was a turning point for Runk as well as his family. In that year, his brother William married and Runk officially started his own photography business,

¹² Curtis, Tom. “Personal “pictures” on life of photographer John Runk.” *Stillwater Gazette*. Feb. 2, 1978.

¹³ Johnston, *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace...*, 14, Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*, Thilgen, Dean R. *John Runk Jr. Timeline and Advertisements*. Draft Jan. 2000.

¹⁴ Brouwer, Mark. “Filling History’s gaps.” *Stillwater Courier*. April 7, 2005. 1A, 2A . Johnston, *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace in Photographs by John Runk*, 14,

¹⁵ “Library given 435 Unique Pictures: John Runk Collection Preserved For Posterity” *Stillwater Post-Messenger*. June 3, 1937, along with note by John Runk. , John Runk is listed as a “rafter” in the Stillwater City directories in 1892.

¹⁶ Curtis. “Personal “pictures””, Gaffney. “Photographer John.”

¹⁷ Curtis, Tom. “Personal “pictures””

¹⁸ Gaffney. “Photographer John Runk.”

though he still worked for the Minnesota Chief Thresher Company.¹⁹ He also built and opened a fishing and hunting lodge called “Star Camp,” devoted to his other favorite pastimes, on Rice Lake, south of Marine Mills, a place of many later family trips and photographs.²⁰

Throughout his first few years as a photographer, Runk worked taking pictures for the Northwest Thresher Company.²¹ It is also rumored that he took mug shot photos for the State Prison in Stillwater. The Stillwater Directories also state at this time he still may have been doing some work for the St. Croix Boom Company. At this time he still lived at home with his family.²² In 1903, Post, a Stillwater Photographer, took his portrait, a picture he would later use in his advertising of his “American Eagle Studio.”²³ By this year, photography was his major occupation, though his interest in inventions became apparent with his experiments with both photography and sound. In 1904, he performed an experiment with a phonograph where he, via telephone, recorded the voice of a person in the St. Croix Valley, 30 miles away, and the played it back to them so they could hear their own voice.²⁴ In this year, Runk is first listed as a photographer in the Stillwater City Directory, though he was still listed as living with his family at 1710 North Main Street with no studio address given.²⁵ In 1905, John Runk Sr. died from what Dean Thilgen called “cardiac dropsy.” The official records for his death list neither parents nor birthplace other than “Germany.”²⁶ John Jr. continued to live with his family, though continually worked on his photography business. In 1907 he finalized the famous “Eagle

¹⁹ Ibid. Johnston, *Stillwater: Minnesota's Birthplace ...*, 14, Runk, John, Primary Documents

²⁰ Thilgen, *John Runk Jr. Timeline and Advertisements*.

²¹ Runk, John, Primary Documents.

²² Stillwater Directory, 1900, 227-228.

²³ Thilgen, *John Runk Jr. Timeline and Advertisements*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, Stillwater Directory, 1904, 231.

²⁶ Thilgen, *John Runk Jr. Timeline and Advertisements*.

and Lamb” emblem for the American Eagle Studio. Also in 1907, Louis Kuhn, brother of photographer John Kuhn, had moved to Stillwater and taken over his brother’s business. Kuhn took the portrait market of the town while Runk concentrated on the commercial market.²⁷ “Runk, John, Photographer” was listed the Stillwater Directory in 1908, “Developing for Amateurs and Catalog work specialty.”²⁸ The next year, after a bout with cancer, his mother Barbara died. The funeral was held at 1220 North Main, the family home at the time.²⁹ In the next few years, he quit working for the Thresher Company to solely work on his studio. In 1912, he moved his studio and residence to 110 North Main, where he remained until 1919. In 1917, dressmaker Myrtle G. Huff began to work for Runk as an assistant, where she would work for over 15 years.³⁰

In the beginning of his career, Runk was part of a surprisingly large community of small town commercial photographers around the country. According to a 1910 census, there were 31,775 commercial photographers nationwide. 16,700—over half—were in small towns like Stillwater.³¹ Runk was most well known for his pictures of Stillwater and the St. Croix Valley, but made the majority of his 65-year photographic career by taking pictures for local companies, such as medical photos, accident photos for insurance companies, local proceedings, such as weddings, family and city events, and would even make copies of birth certificates and checks.³² One of his favorite photographic methods was using a timer, so he was often found in the backs of his own

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Stillwater Directory, 1908, 227.

²⁹ Thilgen, *John Runk Jr. Timeline and Advertisements*.

³⁰ Ibid, Minnesota Historical Society. Entry *Runk, John Jr.* from *Directory of Minnesota Photographers*. <http://www.mnhs.org/people/photographers/R.htm> (6/12/08)

³¹ Sears, Stephen W., Murry Belsky, & Douglas Tunstall, editors. *Hometown U.S.A.* New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1975, 7

³² Brouwer, Mark. “Filling History’s gaps.”, Heaton, Meg. “John Runk’s pictorial legacy lives on.” *The Fishwrapper: Complementary Stillwater Guide*. July, 1989, Volume 11, Number 4.

photographs of group events. He would focus the image, and then step into the frame at the last minute.³³ Despite much of his work being that of an average small-town photographer—many of these photographers had to have a large range of territory and subjects in order to get enough business to sustain themselves—Runk would soon prove to be unique in his subject matter, inventiveness, creativity and mindset.³⁴

From his early days of tinkering with the workings of a camera and phonograph, Runk continued to experiment and toy with different ways to improve not only the quality and effectiveness of the tools of his profession, but those of many machines around him. Runk paved the way for technology in Stillwater: his studio had a telephone connection as early as 1908, and he was said to own one of the first phonographs in Stillwater.³⁵ Still maintaining connections to the State Prison in Stillwater, Runk was invited to play this phonograph by Warden Wolfer at the Warden's House of the prison for Christmas.³⁶

Runk's interest in music and phonographs would lead him to create his own phonographic records and also one of his best and most well known inventions. In November of 1921, Runk received a U.S. patent for a device he called the "Kleantone" which cleaned out the grooves in phonographic records and gave them a better sound. He later patented it in Canada.³⁷ The majority of his time and money, however, was spent furthering the technology of his own profession. He was the first photographer in Stillwater to use electric lights in the taking of portraits, the first to use cut-film instead of

³³ Gaffney, Myrle. "Photographer John Runk..."

³⁴ Sears, et all. *Hometown U.S.A.*, 7

³⁵ Stillwater Directory 1908-1909, 314, "Lumberjack Days Salutes John Runk, Photographer" May 13, 1974.

³⁶ Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*, Nos. 339, 426.

³⁷ Ibid, Gaffney. "Photographer John Runk..."

dry plates, and one of the first to use tinting in his portraits, which made him very popular with the ladies.³⁸ He created many cameras, printers, and instruments for his own use: a printer with an electric timer, and a camera that could be used for multiple purposes, including, among other uses, portraits, outdoor pictures, and enlargements. This last item took him years to perfect and would later help make possible his Historic Collection.³⁹

Along with his inventions and innovations, what truly set John Runk apart from the thousands of other small-town photographers around the country was his true sense of history: preserving both the past and the present for future generations. John Runk sought to preserve his collection and work, which, as Sears said, “most small town photographers did not or could not.”⁴⁰ This preservation came hand in hand with Runk’s continual use of the most technologically advanced photography equipment. While Runk quickly switched to flexible film when it came into prominence, many small-town photographers continued to use glass plates, either because they preferred the better clarity the glass plates provided or simply the fact that they preferred to work with the method they were used to. Because of these tendencies, in most parts of the country, while the quality of the photographs that survive is superb, there is very little that does.⁴¹ John Runk’s work survives from a time and place where few others do.

Runk’s true genius was, perhaps, not necessarily in the preservation of his own photographs of the moments in which he had witnessed, but rather the preservation of the work of his predecessors: historical photos of the St. Croix Valley itself, documenting the

³⁸ Gaffney, Myrle. “Photographer John Runk...”, Johnston. *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace...*, 17-19, Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*, Nos. 339, 426.

³⁹ Johnston. *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace...*, 17-19 Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*, Nos. 339, 426.

⁴⁰ Sears, et al. *Hometown U.S.A.*, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

community's blooming youth and the lumbering industry that gave it birth. In an effort to protect and preserve this history, while still maintaining his own business livelihood, Runk began the process of creating the Historical Collection, the collection of well-documented photographs that would later consume much of his life and earn John Runk a permanent name in the history books.

According to articles written at the time of the donation of his first collection, 1937, Runk had begun the creation of what would become the historical collection when he was dissatisfied with his own photographs, the oldest of which only dated to the 1890's.⁴² In a process he began in the early days of his studio, Runk began to collect old, historical photos and information on their subjects and location. To gain photos, Runk made announcements and advertisements to the public: bring in an historical photo, and Runk would copy it with his photographic equipment free-of-charge, keeping one copy for his collection and returning both the original and a new, cleaner copy.⁴³ Though the process seemed simple, the work required on Runk's new project turned out to be immense. The original photos were often in bad condition, faded or cracked, and Runk, who was honing his skills in photography to their peak, cleaned them up for his collection.⁴⁴ Along with the copying of the photos themselves, Runk did many hours of painstaking research on the subjects of the photos, for even though he asked those bringing in the photos to supply information, many times they did not. Runk wished to get as much information as possible, and went to many sources to so that he could give

⁴² "Library given 435 Unique Pictures: John Runk Collection Preserved For Posterity" *Stillwater Post-Messenger*. June 3, 1937, along with note by John Runk.

⁴³ Gaffney. "Photographer John Runk....", Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*, Nos. 339, 426

⁴⁴ Runk, John. *Cards from the Runk Photographic Collection*, Nos. 339, 426

credit to the original photographers and so that his collection could be historically accurate as possible to his high standards.⁴⁵

The creation and structure of this collection became a major part of Runk's life, taking up time, energy and money. Even though many of the photos he received free of charge, Runk put money in equipment, restoration and research, conjecturing later that the creation of the original collection cost between 870 and 1,500 dollars.⁴⁶ In order to avoid conflicts with his regular work, much of the work had to be done at night.⁴⁷ His nephew Earl, whom Runk would later live with, noted that "Uncle John would often stay up until one or two o'clock in the morning copying old photographs. However, he kept his energy up by sleeping late in the morning."⁴⁸ By the mid-1930s, his collection had reached over four hundred photographs. By this time, the collection was well known, and Runk began to receive offers to buy the original collection or copies of it from several public and private collectors.⁴⁹ However, all of these efforts failed because Runk strongly believed that the collection should stay in Stillwater, the town that had been a center of the American Lumber industry for over 50 years, and be available for the public to see.⁵⁰

In January of 1937, Runk wrote to the Stillwater Public Library, offering to donate to the library the total of the then-435 photo collection, and any future photos he would add, including with his letter a sample of 69 photos. "My offer to you," wrote Runk, "is to put my entire Historical Collection, to which I plan to add on from time to time, in the Library, to be the property of the Library for all time...There are no strings to

⁴⁵ Ibid, Gaffney, Myrle. "Photographer John Runk was born 100 years ago on May 10."

⁴⁶ "Runk Gives Historical Collection to Library" *Stillwater Gazette*, June 10, 1937, along with Note from John Runk., Runk, John. "Subject: Historical Collection" Letter to the Stillwater Public Library Board asking about the acceptance of the Historical Collection. January 11, 1937

⁴⁷ Myrle. "Photographer John Runk..."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Library given 435 Unique Pictures..."

⁵⁰ Ibid, "Runk Gives Historical Collection to Library."

this offer.”⁵¹ The Library would later accept his offer, and Runk officially donated the collection on June 1st, 1937. *The Stillwater Gazette* reported on this occasion, describing the collection:

Each picture panel is 8 by 10 inches in size and by a special process descriptive data has been superimposed upon the panel. The collection is made up in books of 25 panels, each mounted on cloth, and hinged so that it may be taken out of the book and placed on display.⁵²

Along with the collection itself, Runk also used his inventive skills to create asbestos-lined cases for the photos, as well as a fire and insect-proof file cabinet in which to store them, both designed to last hundreds of years.⁵³ Runk was very protective of his collection, leaving for the Library a complex trust agreement on the care and use of his photographs. He included instructions on how to deal with, for example, insect damaged photos, including the names of insects, a formula to get rid of them, and examples of damaged photos.⁵⁴ The agreement also included how, when, and why pictures could be displayed and used. The terms dictate that “no picture shall be exposed for inspection or examination except under glass, either in frames or display cases...” Photographs were to only be handled by library officials, and the photos were not to be used for commercial purposes for any reason in John Runk’s lifetime.⁵⁵

The donation of the photos was publicized around the area, as well as through the Minnesota Historical Society.⁵⁶ A year later, in June of 1938, Runk made his first major

⁵¹ Runk, John. “Subject: Historical Collection” Letter to the Stillwater Public Library Board asking about the acceptance of the Historical Collection. January 11, 1937

⁵² “Runk Gives Historical Collection to Library” *Stillwater Gazette*, June 10, 1937, along with Note from John Runk

⁵³ Ibid, Johnston, *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace...*, 19

⁵⁴ Heaton, Meg. “Heirs to a Priceless Fortune”, Runk, John. “Instructions for the Care and Preservation of the Runk Historical Collection” Stamped May 11, 1937, Stillwater Public Library

⁵⁵ “Runk Gives Historical Collection to Library”

⁵⁶ “News and Comment.” *Minnesota Historical Quarterly*, Volume 18, 334.

addition to the collection, adding 187 photos.⁵⁷ He would continue making additions to the collection until his death. He was said to have collected over 4,000 photographs in his life, including those taken himself.⁵⁸ Later, copies of the collection were donated to both the Minnesota Historical Society, which currently boasts the largest collection of Runk images, and the Washington County Historical Society.⁵⁹ Today, Runk's historical collection remains one of the largest and most well-documented collections of the subject and time in the nation.

Though many of the photos of his historical collection were taken by other photographers, Runk's work itself achieved great prominence. Two of his photographs were once displayed in the "great" Huntington Hartford Museum in New York City.⁶⁰ In Stillwater itself, Runk's friend Tom Curtis displayed copies of 20 of Runk's best photographs of the St. Croix Valley in the Curtis Caves. Runk was very proud of this, telling Curtis that "No other place would gain as much attention as they do in the caves."⁶¹

Throughout the rest of his life, Runk continued his life's pursuit of photography and invention, moving through many studios over the years. Not one to be left in the wake of new technology, it was said that Runk owned the first black and white television in the area, though, "he was perhaps as much interested in the mechanics of the set as the programs."⁶² When film became available, he began to experiment with that new form of technology, filming many of the same events he would have photographed, including city

⁵⁷ "John Runk Adds 187 Pictures to Exhibit" June 2, 1938, Thilgen, *John Runk Jr. Timeline and Advertisements*.

⁵⁸ Brouwer. "Filling History's gaps."

⁵⁹ Johnston *Stillwater: Minnesota's Birthplace...*, 19.

⁶⁰ . "John Runk, Photographer, Dies Monday" *Stillwater Evening Gazette*. October 19, 1964

⁶¹ Curtis. "Personal "pictures""

⁶² Gaffney, Myrle. "Photographer John Runk was born 100 years ago on May 10." Spavin, Don. "Pioneer Pictorial Feature" *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. August 17, 1952.

events and the landscape of the St. Croix Valley. Though he claimed they were just a hobby, many of his films were in demand from various organizations.⁶³ In the 1950s, a feature was written about him by *St. Paul Pioneer Press*'s Don Spavin. Spavin wrote in his amazement how, at the age of 74, Runk still lived by his profession and continued to work nonstop on the project that had consumed his life, doing all of his work on his own expense, and still occasionally staying up until 3 in the morning working on his Historical Collection. "I'm not interested in making a pile of money out of this," Runk told Spavin, "but it's my contribution to the city I've called home for so many years."⁶⁴ Even in his 70s, Runk continued to admire new technology. In November of 1955, Runk bought the first color TV in Stillwater from Jim O'Brien at Simonet Furniture and Carpet Company for the value of \$1,000. Jim said he also bought a black and white set at the same time, just in case the other ran out.⁶⁵ When he became physically unable to walk from his home on West St. Croix Avenue to his studio in downtown Stillwater in 1957 he moved into a small apartment in the Cosmopolitan Bank building, where he would stay for the rest of his life.⁶⁶ John Runk never retired, working tirelessly photographing and documenting the city in which he had lived his life. In his last years, he always hurried, attempting to get the collection ready for after his death. His niece, Helen Runk Ritzer, remembered running into him one day outside his home. "I teased him that he was spending too much of his money on the collection" Helen said in an interview from 1987, "and that he should save some to leave me. He smiled but told me 'No, the money would be gone too

⁶³ "John Runk, Photographer, Dies Monday" *Stillwater Evening Gazette*. October 19, 1964

⁶⁴ Spavin. "Pioneer Pictorial Feature."

⁶⁵ Johnston. *Stillwater: Minnesota's Birthplace*, 81, Runk's primary documents

⁶⁶ Gaffney. "Photographer John Runk...", Thilgen, *John Runk Jr. Timeline and Advertisements*.

soon, but the collection will be forever.”⁶⁷ In the 1960s, Runk began to have health problems, and was in and out of Lakeview hospital several times.⁶⁸ In around September of 1964, Runk had a light stroke. Only 6 weeks later, on October 19, John Runk was found dead in his home, having passed away from a heavy stroke that morning.⁶⁹ His funeral was held at Simonet funeral home, and he was buried next to his parents and siblings in Fairview Cemetery in Stillwater.⁷⁰

Though his photographs are well known, and his contribution recognized by the communities of the St. Croix Valley, John Runk as a man is often overshadowed by his work: while many write about the photographs of Runk, a concise biography has yet to be written. John Runk was a unique, creative, and oftentimes eccentric man. Tom Curtis, one of Runk’s good friends, claimed to have known Runk “better than any man could know him.” According to Curtis, Runk was “very eccentric, very emotional and very sensitive. He angered very easily, because he was a genius. I think that all people, men and women, that excel in a particular field, can be found to possess these qualities.”⁷¹ He was a stickler for details, which played a part in both his profession and his everyday life. For his work, the perfect shot was essential; he once even climbed a pole in Stillwater to get a picture of a fire.⁷² “Everything he did was done with precision,” said Tom Curtis, “...I don’t think there was an ethnologist or anthropologist that was more exacting in his work than John.”⁷³ It was this avid and meticulous work that made his Historical

⁶⁷ Heaton, Meg. “Heirs to a Priceless Fortune...”

⁶⁸ “John Runk, Photographer, Dies Monday”

⁶⁹ Ibid, Information from the death certificate of John Runk, held at the Washington County Vital Records Office.

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Curtis, Tom. “Personal “pictures”

⁷² Peterson, Brent. “Valley photographer Runk, A renaissance-man.” *St. Croix Valley Press*. May 11, 1995. Page 9

⁷³ Curtis, Tom. “Personal “pictures” on life of photographer John Runk.”

Collection and its accuracy so extraordinary and invaluable. In his private life, he was a perfectionist and made positive that everything was tidy and in its place. Curtis noted that Runk often made comments about the cleanliness of restaurant's silverware, and he appreciated finding those at Curtis' Caves "well washed and clean."⁷⁴ In 1945, Runk purchased a family tombstone and new stones for his parents and siblings. At that time, he also dug his own grave and purchased a cement vault for the casket. Inside the vault, said Curtis, Runk also placed a padded box with a quart of whiskey in it for the pallbearers. Almost twenty years later, Curtis served as a pallbearer for Runk's funeral, though, he said, "I didn't see the whiskey. I expect the fellows that opened his grave took it."⁷⁵ Ready for all possible outcomes, Runk also once told Curtis that he had paid Glaser's Greenhouse to place flowers on his grave on Memorial Day, and Curtis noted that for several years after Runk's death they did.⁷⁶

Though he was called a genius and an artist, John Runk was known to be a plain living man. He preferred meat and potatoes to sweets, and was easy to please at meal times.⁷⁷ In his feature on Runk, Don Spavin noted that he did not dress "arty," preferring, instead to dress in overalls as working garb, Runk explaining that he liked the pockets for carrying equipment.⁷⁸ His nephew Earl Runk, son of his brother William, says that his uncle never cared for material things like clothes or cars. He was well known to walk or hike everywhere, taking his equipment with him in a suitcase or sled in the winter, even as far as Taylor's Falls.⁷⁹ At the age of 74, when Spavin wrote his article, Runk joked,

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, Heaton. "Heirs to a Priceless Fortune..."

⁷⁶ Curtis. "Personal "pictures"..."

⁷⁷ Gaffney, "Photographer John Runk..."

⁷⁸ Spavin, "Pioneer Pictorial Feature"

⁷⁹ Gaffney, "Photographer John Runk...", Johnston, *Stillwater: Minnesota's Birthplace...*, 12

“I’m too old to drive a car, they say, so I usually walk or take a cab.”⁸⁰ After moving to Stillwater as a child, he never left, and the farthest he ever traveled was the Chicago World’s Fair, where he could see inventions that intrigued him.⁸¹ Runk’s interest in history, which helped fuel his Historic Collection, led him to, with some friends, to attempt to halt the destruction of the Old Minnesota Prison in Stillwater, though they were unsuccessful.⁸² Runk was a kind man, and during the depression, he bought jewelry regularly from a neighboring jewelry store, even though he didn’t need it. His gave much of the excess jewelry to his niece Helen.⁸³ He put nearly all of his money back into his photography and Historical collection: when he died his assets were said to be less than \$3,000.⁸⁴

Though Runk had a reputation for being a loner, he was quite close to his family, especially his young nieces and nephews. His niece Helen Runk Ritzer, recalled many fond memories from both her youth and adulthood of her uncle. When she was very young, Runk, using his jewelry making and tinkering expertise, gave Helen a completely handmade doll, from the clothes to the jewelry. Runk told her to take good care of the doll, and would often check up on it and once took Helen’s portrait with it.⁸⁵ Runk’s nieces and nephews were also common models in his advertising and parade displays. Nieces Irene and Stella were early models for the American Eagle Studio, and Helen was once a model for Runk’s invention, “Kleantone”. Helen also later worked as an assistant in Runk’s studio as a young woman.⁸⁶ Though they never traveled very far, Runk took

⁸⁰ Spavin. “Pioneer Pictorial Feature”

⁸¹ Gaffney. “Photographer John...”

⁸² Curtis. “Personal “pictures”...”

⁸³ Heaton. “Heirs to a Priceless Fortune...”

⁸⁴ Gaffney. “Photographer John Runk...”, Johnston. *Stillwater: Minnesota’s Birthplace...*, 12

⁸⁵ Heaton. “Heirs to a Priceless Fortune...”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

small trips with his family. Helen said that many Sundays she would drive Runk and his friends to their favorite river spots for days of shooting.⁸⁷ In the 1920's, Runk and his brothers Charles and William took a trip back to the little plot in Menomonie, Wisconsin, where they had been born, in order to see and photograph the cabin. Unfortunately, the cabin had been knocked down and instead they took pictures next to the new farmhouse that had been built there.⁸⁸

John Runk never married, though there are many photos of him with female friends. There did, however, appear to be a special lady in his life at one point. Found in his belongings after his death was what appeared to be a diamond engagement ring, which was willed to his nephew Earl's wife.⁸⁹ The identity of this woman remains a mystery, though Helen believed that the woman was Runk's assistant of over 15 years, Myrtle Huff. When Huff later married someone else, Helen mentioned to her that "I always thought she was going to marry Uncle John." Huff replied that she couldn't wait forever. "When I mentioned it to John later, he admitted he had made a big mistake in letting her get away, and I think he always regretted it."⁹⁰

Since his death, John Runk's work has gotten continual press from newspaper articles, photography exhibits, and other types of recognition. Though in the book *Hometown USA*, published in 1975, editor Sears points out the uniqueness of Runk as a photographer, it is only recently when the contribution of Runk to the profession of photography and history of the St. Croix area have begun to be truly appreciated. In 2008, while the state of Minnesota was celebrating her sesquicentennial, Stillwater Mayor

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Gaffney. "Photographer John Runk..."

⁸⁹ Ibid, Johnston. *Stillwater: Minnesota's Birthplace...*, 19

⁹⁰ Heaton. "Heirs to a Priceless Fortune..."

proclaimed Runk’s birthday, May 10th, to be John Runk day, celebrating his importance to the community. The celebration, held at the Stillwater Public Library where Runk donated the first part of his epic Historic Collection, included book signings and an amateur photography contest. Coordinator Carol Parendo has said that she wishes the event to become an annual one.⁹¹ John Runk was unique in not only preserving the past, but preserving the present moments for the future generations. “He stopped time in his tracks,” Tom Curtis said of his friend, “when the rest of us saw that which we saw and let it pass by.”⁹² Washington County Historical Society Executive Director Brent Peterson appreciates Runk’s contribution to the history of Stillwater and the St. Croix Valley: “Because of him, we know what the opera house looked like. We know what ‘Fisherman’ John Jeremy looked like... We know what the lumber industry looked like. Instead of reading about it, we can actually see the photographs.”⁹³ Recently, films taken in John Runk’s later years have surfaced, and more research is being done into the life and work of a man who was in love with his profession, and worked avidly and meticulously to save his work and the moments he captured of the city he loved for posterity.

“I want no money from anyone. My only wish is to leave something in Stillwater when I pass away which will “live” and will perpetuate for all time the history of this region.”

—John Runk⁹⁴

⁹¹ City of Stillwater, Minnesota Proclamation, Signed by Mayor Ken Harycki on May 6th, 2008, Proclaiming May 10th, 2008, John Runk Day., Morris, Steve. “John Runk’s Stillwater: Saturday event at library to commemorate famed photographer’s work.” Stillwater Gazette. May 8th, 2008. Page 1, 16.

⁹² Curtis. “Personal “pictures”...”

⁹³ Divine, Mary. “Saving history through a lens.” Saint Paul Pioneer Press. May 4, 2008, p. 1B, 5B

⁹⁴ Runk, John. “Subject: Historical Collection” Letter to the Stillwater Public Library Board asking about the acceptance of the Historical Collection. January 11, 1937

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