Bierstadt labelled this scene, "Wolf River Ford, Kansas." It was an Oregon trail crossing of the Wolf river in northwest Doniphan county in 1859.
Pike's Peak emigrants preparing to shove off from St. Joseph, Mo., in the spring of 1859. This is another of the rare Bierstadt photographs recently acquired by the Kansas State Historical Society (see pp. 1-5).
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Some Rare Western Photographs by Albert Bierstadt Now in the Historical Society Collections

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RECENTLY the Kansas State Historical Society acquired five rare photographs of the West which have been lost to the public for nearly 100 years. They are part of a large group of stereoscopic views which Albert Bierstadt, the noted artist, made in the spring and summer of 1859. Three of these pictures are featured in this issue of the Quarterly and are being published probably for the first time anywhere.

The scene on the cover of the Quarterly was taken by Bierstadt in the now extinct town of Bellemont, Doniphan county, probably in early May, 1859. At that time Bellemont was one of the major outfitting points for emigrants to Pike’s Peak and the West. One writer said that Bellemont was the busiest town in Doniphan county during the Pike’s Peak gold rush.¹ Today the town does not exist, but this photograph provides excellent physical evidence of its appearance during its heyday.² Also reprinted are two other photographs taken about the same time. One shows a group of Pike’s Peak emigrants waiting on the banks of the Missouri at St. Joseph for the steam ferry which would carry them across the river, perhaps to Bellemont. The third picture is a view of a ford on Wolf river in northwest Doniphan county, but the exact location has not been determined conclusively.³

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1. Historical Flat Book of Doniphan County, Kansas (Chicago, 1882), pp. 43, 44.
2. Bellemont had its beginnings in 1852 with the establishment of a trading post on the west shore of the Missouri river in present Kansas by John H. and James R. Whitehead. For many years the place was known as both Whitehead and Bellemont. In the spring of 1855 the Whitehead Town Company was organized, land was purchased and settlement began. In 1855 the territorial legislature authorized James R. Whitehead to operate a ferry across the Missouri. This act was repealed in 1859 and a new ferry company was organized. This company obtained a steam ferry boat and the trip from Belt- monont to St. Joseph was made twice daily. This ferry was discontinued after two years of service. The town of Bellemont was incorporated on February 16, 1869, and the Whitehead Town Company changed its name to the Bellemont Town Company a few days later. In 1876 the townsite was officially abandoned by an act of the state legislature. Bellemont was located in the SW¼, Sec. 15, T 3 S, R 22 E, or on the Missouri river 1 ½ miles north of Wathena.—Ibid.; The Statutes of the Territory of Kansas, 1855, pp. 775, 853; Private Laws of the Territory of Kansas . . . ., 1859, pp. 37-39; ibid., 1860, pp. 76-78, 224, 225; The Session Laws of 1876 . . ., Kansas, p. 326; St. Joseph (Mo.) Weekly West, June 12, 1859.
3. The two photographs which are not reprinted are pictures of a Shoshone warrior in Nebraska and an Indian pony somewhere in Kansas.
The date of these pictures suggests that they may be the earliest photographs extant which show this Kansas branch of the Oregon trail. Kansans will be interested in the fact that the only other Kansas photograph—excluding portraits—in the collections of the Historical Society which predates these is a daguerreotype of a Free-State cannon and its crew taken in Topeka in 1856. In fact, the Society in all of its over 33,000 pictures, has only three other photographic scenes of territorial Kansas. One of these, the Doy rescue party, was portrayed on ambrotypes⁴ by A. G. DaLee of Lawrence in July, 1859, and another, a Manhattan street scene of 1860, was made by a photographer, now unidentified. The third scene shows the office of the Neosho Valley Register, Burlington, probably late in 1859. (Three photographs of street scenes in Atchison are borderline cases but they have not yet been positively identified as dating from the territorial period.) So these new Bierstadt photographs are important to the history of Kansas in two respects—they are "firsts" of the northern branch of the Kansas portion of the Oregon trail and they add to the meager number of Kansas territorial views.⁵

Albert Bierstadt, widely known today for his huge canvasses of Western Americana, is less well known as a photographer. At the time of his first trip west he was a young man just home from art study in Europe. The object of his journey was to make sketches and photograph scenery for later paintings. Bierstadt took a great many pictures on the trip, a fact which is remarkable in itself when one considers the bulky equipment and the technical difficulties inherent in photography in those days. He may have taken as many as 100 photographs though only 51 have been listed. Bierstadt wrote "we have taken many stereoscopic views, but not so many of mountain scenery as I could wish, owing to various obstacles attached to the process, but still a goodly number."⁶ The artist photographed many Indians for he realized that the race was disappearing and he felt it his duty to record as much of the vanishing culture as possible.⁷

⁴ The daguerreotype and ambrotype are considered photographs since they fall within the definition of photography: the production of an image on a sensitized surface by the action of light or other form of radiant energy.

⁵ The Bierstadt photographs were obtained through the generous assistance of Mrs. Byron Dexter of South Woodstock, Vt., who for years has been interested in photographs and stereoscopic views of the American scene. Mrs. Dexter also sent a list of Bierstadt stereos from an 1860 catalogue.


⁷ Ibid.
Bierstadt did not travel west alone. At St. Joseph he and several other Eastern artists joined the surveying expedition of Col. Frederick West Lander. Colonel Lander was then superintendent of the Fort Kearny, South Pass and Honey Lake (California) wagon road and the trip was designed to relocate certain portions of the emigrant route as well as to survey the road. Bierstadt and the other artists traveled with the train only for protection; they paid their own expenses and were not officially connected with the expedition.8

The Lander train left St. Joseph during the first week of May, 1859,8 traveling through the northern tier of Kansas counties to the upper crossing of the Big Blue and then northwest toward Fort Kearny and the Platte emigrant route. Bierstadt took pictures all along the way. Several other photos were made of St. Joseph and Bellemont as well as views of Troy and the fords of the Little and Big Blue rivers. He also photographed a ferry on the Big Blue but failed to indicate its identity. If this were Francis J. Marshall’s ferry at Marysville, which was used by thousands of travelers on the Oregon trail, then this picture, too, would be of unusual historical interest. Unfortunately it is among the many Bierstadt photographs which have disappeared.10 In Nebraska territory Bierstadt photographed natural landmarks, Sioux and Shoshone Indians, and the Lander expedition’s train. At South Pass he and two companions turned back. The artist returned to his home in New Bedford, Mass., where a few months later, in 1860, a company consisting of his two brothers, who were stereographic photographers, placed copies of his Western views on the market. Their catalogue stated that “these views were procured at great expense, and as far as we know are the only views on the market giving a true representation of Western Life and Western Scenery.”

Today, 99 years later, only five of the Bierstadt stereos—those purchased by the Historical Society—have been located. What became of the others has long been a mystery. Leading depositories of historical photographs have no information of their whereabouts. Should anyone find others, the Society will be interested in hearing about them.


The following list of Bierstadt's 51 Western pictures is taken from the 1860 catalogue. Asterisks indicate the five photographs purchased by the Society. Missing numbers between 50 and 150 were blank, so it is not known if they were Western photos or scenes in other areas.

53. Oglala Sioux, Fort Laramie, Nebraska.
54. Colonel Lander's train.
56. Emigrant team, St. Joseph, Mo.
58. Cheyenne Village, Platte river, Nebraska.
63. Bellemont ferry-boat, Kansas.
64. Devil's Gate from above, Nebraska.
65. Market place, St. Joseph, Mo.
* 66. Shoshone warrior.
69. Salt river valley.
72. Sioux village near Fort Laramie, Nebraska.
73. Study of horses, Missouri.
75. Devil's Gate, passage of the Sweet Water river, Nebraska.
77. Part of Colonel Lander's men.
81. Emigrants waiting for the ferry, St. Joseph, Mo.
82. Shanty in Bellemont, Kan.
83. Ford of the Big Blue, Kansas.
* 84. Bellemont, Kan.
85. Unpacking Indian goods, Nebraska.
86. Waiting for the ferry, St. Joseph, Mo.
87. Bellemont, Missouri river, Kansas.
88. Emigrant train on the Big Sandy river, Oregon.
89. Near Troy, Kan.
90. Shoshone children, Nebraska.
91. Ferry on the Big Blue, Kansas.
92. Ford of the Little Blue, Kansas.
93. Log cabin, Kansas.
94. Oglala Sioux, Horse creek, Nebraska.
* 95. Indian pony, Kansas.
* 96. Wolf river ford, Kansas.
97. Shoshone Indians, Nebraska.
98. Oglala Sioux village, North fork of the Platte, Nebraska.
99. Sioux lodge, Nebraska.
101. Shoshone family, Nebraska.
102. Sioux Indians, Nebraska.
103. Warrior.
106. U. S. train in camp, Nebraska.
107. Shoshone warriors, mounted, Nebraska.
116. Shoshone guide, Nebraska.
118. Indian interpreter, Nebraska.
119. Emigrants traveling on the plains, Nebraska.
122. Oglala Sioux, the Indian Queen, Nebraska.
123. Colonel Lander's ambulance on the plains, Nebraska.
124. Culinary art on the plains, Nebraska.
125. Cottonwood trees, near Boiling Springs, Nebraska.
126. Cottonwood Springs, Platte river, Nebraska.
128. Colonel Lander's men among the Rocky Mountains.
131. Shoshone village, Nebraska.
132. Lander's train camping on the Colorado.
* 134. Pike's Peak emigrants, St. Joseph, Mo.
138. Rocky Mountain trapper.