

Charles H. Tremear 1866-1943: Tintype Influencer

On a brisk fall day Henry Ford and his staff walked slowly through his new Edison Institute of Technology's Greenfield Village living history complex in Dearborn, Michigan. It was October 20, 1929, the final inspection before the museum would open to the public the next day. After a complete tour, Mr. Ford asked his people a very important and fateful question: Where is the Tintype Gallery? A moment of bewilderment came over his people. To this, the richest and the most powerful man in the world said, "Build it immediately, before the opening. This village is not complete without one. We will need a Tintype photographer. Find him." 24 hours later, the small skylight studio was up and the fresh paint was drying. Almost as fast, one of Henry's employees, working in the shipping department at the River Rouge Plant, answered the call for an experienced Tintypist. Charles "**Charlie**" Tremear. Not only was Charlie an expert wet-plate collodion Tintype Photographer, but he also knew how to make fine Daguerreotypes. Henry knew he had struck gold at the first swing of his pick.

Charles Tremear was born in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. As a young man in 1888 he apprenticed to an elderly photographer and learned how to make Tintypes and even how to make Daguerreotypes. The Dag enjoyed a slight revival as a novelty in 1889 with the 50th anniversary of its introduction to the world. Charlie soon went on his own and became a peripatetic Tintype Photographer. He traveled about the country in a twenty-eight foot long "skylight outfitted gallery on wagon wheels", drawn by a team of four horses. His price was "four tintype portrait pictures for 50cents". They were all finished and matted and in your hands, while you waited or when you picked them up the same day. No mailing them later in pizza slice boxes! This he did till 1909 when he came to Detroit and went to work at the Ford plant, which had just begun its first year of making the world changing Model T Ford automobile. Charlie was married by then and had four children. His wife Mable cut his thick mane of hair only once a year. By his early 60's Charlie's wild hair had gone white, and he sported a shaggy mustache and likewise dense eyebrows. He was often told he was a dead ringer for the late great American icon, Mark Twain, and especially so when Tremear

was a feature at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. There at the Eastman Kodak exhibition on August 17, 1939, Charlie demonstrated the Daguerreotype process. It was the 100th anniversary of the presentation to the French Academy by Daguerre of his process which inaugurated modern photography. But, meanwhile, back at the Greenfield Village studio, advanced age had taken its toll on Charlie's eyesight. He said he compensated for that by wearing two pairs of glasses at once to focus the camera, or he would just let Jack, his apprentice, do the final focusing while he was in the corner darkroom, just inside to the left of the studio's entrance, preparing the plate. He shot with an Anthony Victoria 5x7 four tube camera for most of his Tintype portrait work. By the end of his life he claimed to have taken more than 40,000 tintypes at the Greenfield Village studio. His goal was to shoot one million tintypes. He likely did, or at least came very close to that figure in his lifetime. Often when any dignitaries came as Henry Ford's guests to see his wonderful museum, the first stop was to the little modest Tintype Studio where Charlie would make Tintype and Daguerreotype portraits of them. Thomas Edison, Herbert Hoover, Walt Disney, Ford himself, to name a few of them. The rest of the time, of course, Charlie was busy making tintypes of the general public. They loved it for what it was and the living history experience. Charlie needed no closet full of Civil War soldier uniforms, audacious hats, or other such period clothing to interest sitters. He was a master of the wet-plate collodion ferrotype tintype process and it showed in the tintype treasures his sitters went home with. No artificial lighting was ever used. Just a well managed sky light or sometimes a shot was done out the front door of an extra large group on the front lawn and at least one time, of a young couple by their new Ford V8 sedan parked there. Charlie prided himself on the varied assortment of vintage head brace stands he used to steady folks for the often 10 to 15 second exposure times in the studio. His tintype plates, of course, were real deal black japanned ferrotype plates and his fixer was what he'd always used to produce those lovely coffee and cream tones, Potassium Cyanide. The few pictures showing him at work reveal no use of rubber gloves. Like, myself, he would risk being branded as an "irresponsible". A shadow box display on the wall by the front door of the gallery with actual samples of his work was his only simple but effective advertisement. No big "eye candy" blowups like we see at aluminotype pop-ups

today. Charlie liked to tell his customers that he was the “last wandering horse drawn Tintypist in America”. Well, until I came along, that is. Here’s how it went: it is a fact that someone can influence a person in dramatic ways, whether the “influencer” be alive or dead. Such is the connection between Charles Tremear and me. In 1973 while in Detroit, I was working as a photographer in training for a commercial portrait studio based there and in Florida, where I lived. On a day off from shooting strobe lit color portraits, I went to see the nearby Greenfield Village museum complex. The place was astounding! Two things stuck out especially to me: the Tintype Gallery Studio and the Model T Ford cars cruising around the village roads. The Tintype Gallery was just a static display by that time and no longer active. But looking inside at the skylight lit studio area, the old equipment, and at the display of early day tintypes and samples of Charlie Tremear’s work, it struck a cord in me way down deep. I promised myself that I would someday figure out how to make tintypes and also I would own a Model T Ford. But, before the Model T came the horse for young Charlie, and so it went for me as well. Only a few years later I donned the mantle of the “last wandering horse drawn Tintypist in America”, lasting seven years. Today, settled down, I still make real deal Ferrotype Tintypes just like Charlie did, teach it in my workshops, and have three Model T Fords. I also have two original Charlie Tremear made tintypes from the early 1930’s. And, by chance, my pet donkey is named “Charlie”.



Tin Type Studio, Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan

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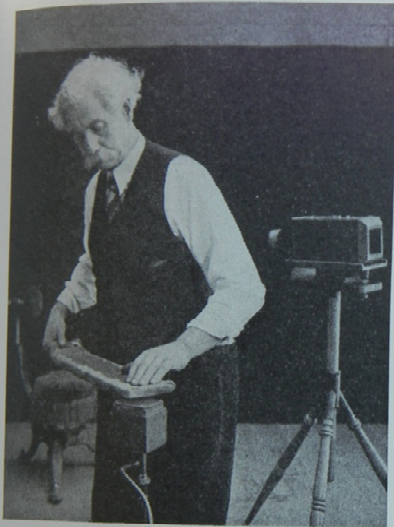


Fig. 7-1. Mr. C. H. Tremear of Greenfield Village, Michigan, shows how a Daguerreotype is made. Above: Buffing the plate, and testing the temperature of the mercury bath. Below: Exposing the plate, and gilding the Daguerreotype plate. (Courtesy Edison Institute.)

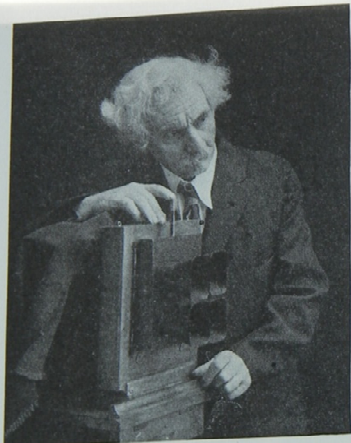


Fig. 7-2. Visitors to Greenfield Village, Michigan, enjoy having a tintype made in the studio of Mr. C. H. Tremear. Above: The tintype camera, and developing the ferrotype. Below: Exposing the ferrotype plate. (Courtesy Edison Institute.)

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