

## ANTHROPOLOGIST REDISCOVERS PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER BENEDICTE WRENSTED

by John Barrat

Call her the Annie Leibovitz of Pocatello, Idaho—an extraordinary woman portrait photographer. In 1894, Benedicte Wrensted settled in this dusty frontier town and made a successful living as a portrait photographer. When she retired some 20 years later, Wrensted left behind a collection of beautiful portraits of both Native and Anglo Americans.

Yet, critical recognition escaped Wrensted in an age before mass-media and the glossy magazine. Her subjects were local people — cowboys, school groups, soldiers, ranchers, firemen, families and newly married couples from Pocatello and nearby Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Rarely were her photographs published. Most were taken home by the customer who paid to have them done and placed on a wall or mantelpiece. When Wrensted sold her photography studio in 1912, she sold all her glass negatives as well. She then moved to California and died, in obscurity, in Los Angeles at the age of 89.

Today, an exhibition of her portraits, “Benedicte Wrensted: An Idaho Photographer in Focus,” has been traveling from Nebraska, Missouri, Washington, Indiana, and Kansas to the Danish Immigrant Museum in Elkhorn, Iowa (5/15/97-6/20/97) and will be on exhibit most likely in Denmark in 1998. A number of her photographs have recently been donated to the Smithsonian’s National Anthropological Archives from private collections, and there is a growing appreciation of her work among Native Americans, anthropologists and the general public.

Wrensted’s recent rise from obscurity—she was unknown a decade ago—is the result of detective work and research by anthropologist Joanna Cohan Scherer of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.

In 1984, Scherer was researching photographs of Great Basin Indians for the Smithsonian’s *Handbook of North American Indians*, when she

discovered a collection of glass negatives in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The negatives were tagged "Portraits of Indians From Southeastern Idaho Reservations, 1897." None of the photos were identified by individual nor attributed to a photographer.

The most beautiful photographs in the world are of little use to scholars if they aren't identified," says Scherer, who has spent years researching and collecting photographs for the Handbook. Still, "the images were so compelling, I had several prints made for possible use later."

That same year, Scherer happened upon some of the same images in the one-room Museum of the Bannock County Historical Society in Pocatello, Idaho. "Tacked up on a wall 20 feet above eye level were five photographs; two I had seen at the National Archives," Scherer recalls. "Closer inspection revealed that the photos were on mounts identifying them as the work of Benedicte Wrensted—a photographer I'd never heard of. The museum curator knew nothing of her either."

Inquiring around Pocatello, Scherer located a few tribal elders who recalled Wrensted's studio. One source told Scherer of a niece of Wrensted's who lived in California. Inspired by these leads, Scherer became determined to learn as much as she could about this little-known woman.

Over the next decade, she read issues of the *Pocatello Tribune*, from its beginning in 1893 to 1912, digging out articles and advertisements that mentioned Wrensted. She contacted Wrensted's niece in California and advertised in local Pocatello newspapers, soliciting information about Wrensted and requesting people with Wrensted portraits to contact her.

After Scherer learned that Wrensted had emigrated to the United States from Denmark at age 36, Scherer applied for and received a grant from the Smithsonian's Suzanne Liebers Erickson Danish Exchange Program to go to Denmark for four weeks. There, searching public records, she unearthed more information about Wrensted's early life and family.



Benedicte Wrensted was born in 1859 in Denmark, attended public schools and learned photography from her aunt, Charlotte Borgen, a self-taught photographer. For a time, Wrensted operated a photography studio in the town of Horsens and was a member of the Danish Photographic Association. "In 1892, her work was publicly recognized by Danish court photographer Mary Steen, which was quite an honor," Scherer says. Few of Wrensted's photographs from this period have surfaced. Wrensted and her mother emigrated in the summer of 1894 to Pocatello to join Peter Wrensted, Benedicte's brother, a carpenter who had moved to Pocatello a few years earlier. Wrensted opened her first Pocatello studio in 1895 and became a leading member of the Danish community there. In 1897, Wrensted placed this advertisement—one of many—in the *Pocatello Tribune*:

Photographs: I am Prepared to compete with all Comers in Workmanship. Artistic Finish and at Reasonable Prices. All work Guaranteed. I am Here to Please and my customer's Satisfaction is my aim. A'm here to Stay, not for a few days, but to Remain with you. Patronize those who Patronize you. Miss B. Wrensted.

In 1994, Scherer wrote in *Visual Anthropology* 6(4): "Although millinery and dressmaking shops were owned by a succession of women proprietors,



Wrensted's status as an unmarried woman in the Pocatello business community, however, seems to have been unique. In the photographic trade, it was not uncommon for single women to become commercial photographers. Photographic techniques and skills were mainly self-taught or taught under brief tutelage with another photographer. Women could carry out their photography careers within the confines of the studio, which was often in their home. This created an aura of domesticity, which gave an edge of respectability to the profession."

As an anthropologist who has been studying historical Native American photographs for more than 25 years, Scherer was also determined to identify as many of the people in Wrensted's photographs—both Indian and Anglo—as possible. In the mid-1980s, she began consulting with Bonnie Wadsworth, the director of the Sho-Ban Tribal Museum. Over the next five years, Wadsworth interviewed Indian elders who provided many identifications.

In 1991, Scherer made copies of each of Wrensted's Indian portraits and took them to Edward Edmo Sr., a Shoshone storyteller from the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. "Edmo was able to identify the families of most of the people in the photographs," Scherer says. "I then took photos to the families on the reservation, who gave me the names of individuals or who verified previous identifications.

Scherer also tracked down the names of many of the Pocatello citizens in Wrensted's photographs. She searched the photo holdings of libraries, museums, historical centers and private individuals for additional Wrensted photographs.

During her search, she discovered a large selection of Wrensted prints owned by the Robert Leonard family of Silver Spring, Md. Leonard had grown up in Pocatello, and his family had a long history there. With Scherer's persuasion, his collection, along with a number of smaller collections of portraits by Wrensted, were donated to the Natural History Museum's National Anthropological Archives.

What sets these portraits apart is Wrensted's skill in capturing the individuality of the people who posed for her," Scherer notes. "Indians from Fort Hall entered her studio from another world, one full of pressures to assimilate and become 'white,' but many of them resisted those pressures and maintained their own integrity."

In some instances, Wrensted did document the accommodation of American Indians to the white culture. For example, she shot two portraits of Pat Tyhee, a Bannock. In the first, he is dressed in traditional clothing. In the second photograph, Tyhee is wearing a business suit. "One critical point is that Wrensted did not go out to the reservation, prying into teepees and shooting people without their permission," Scherer says. "All her customers, Indian and Anglo, came to her and paid to have their portraits taken"

"There are no typical members of the Northern Shoshone and Bannock community: each is an individual. Nor are there any typical photographs: each results from the interaction of photographer and subject at a moment of history and from the viewers' reading of the image. Until we can fully integrate this methodology into photo research, we will too often fall into the trap of reinforcing exotic stereotypes of the 'other'" (Scherer: 1994).

"This is a wonderful collection, interesting and very different," says Rayna Green, director of the American Indian Program at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. "There is relatively little photography of the Shoshone and Bannock Indians during this period."

"Looking at her photography cheers me up, because she wasn't trying to document the last Native Americans," Green says. "Everyone should see these pictures. They will give you a different take on the people of this time period—both Indian and white."

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