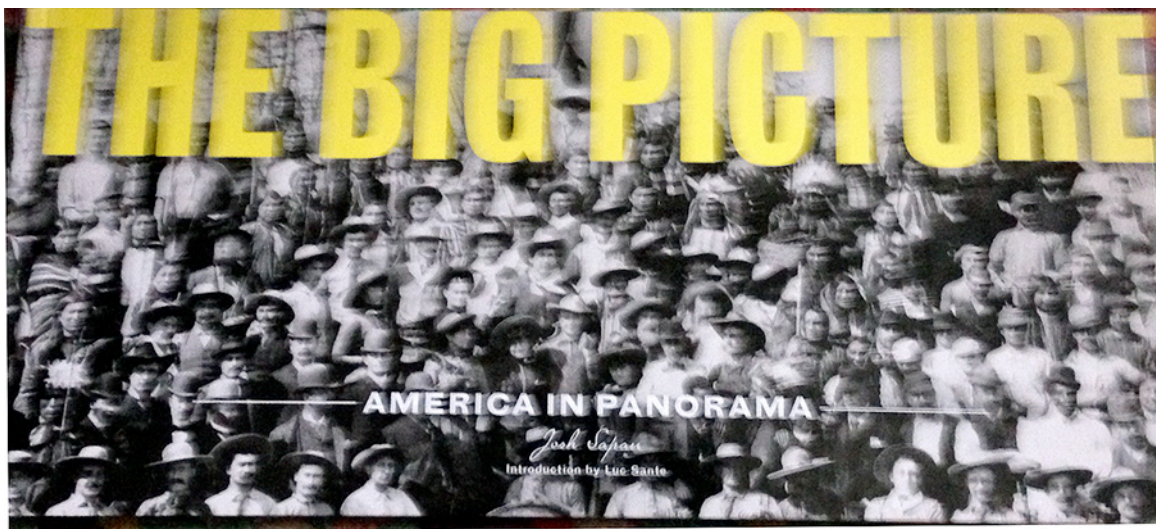


The Groups We Belong To

By Walter Cummins

A review of *The Big Picture: America in Panorama*, from the collection of Josh Sapan (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013)



The *Big Picture: America in Panorama* celebrates both the possibilities of the panoramic camera and the manner in which the United States organized itself during the decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The people pictured are arranged in wide-angle spreads, layered in rows, some standing, some kneeling, some seated, most in their best clothing, assembled for an occasion important enough to be memorialized by a camera. Their groups gathered represent an extensive variety of occupations, professions, and causes, as well as others just there for a single event—associations of a particular time and place, many long forgotten.

The unusual dimensions of this hardcover book—fifteen inches wide and seven inches high—make it difficult to fit onto a library shelf. But that shape is necessary for the

great majority of the black and white prints displayed, a few so wide they take up a thirty-inch double-page spread.

Today, a hundred years after most of these pictures were taken, what could we substitute for a wide-angle photograph? Facebook friends? LinkedIn contacts? Consider the logistical impossibility of gathering those people in one place. Today's alternative might be a screenshot of all one's friends and links, but with each face in a separate box rather than a unified image.

The photographs in *The Big Picture* come from the collection of Josh Sapan, accumulated during a thirty-five-year quest. In his foreword Sapan, president and chief executive of AMC Networks, notes, "Over time, I began to understand the odd window that the groups provided into the history of the United States." He finds that, despite the apparent stiffness of the scenes, a closer look at the expressions of the people "often reveals much in the nuance: pride, determination, focus."

Luc Sante's introduction provides information about the history, development, and uses of the panoramic camera. Celebrities such as Yogi Berra, Dick Cavett, Arianna Huffington, Norman Lear, Anna Quindlen, and Lawrence Summers contribute brief commentaries about some of the photographs. Behind the scenes for much of the text was the writer Bill Mesce, Jr.

In suits, hats, and overcoats, members of the American Iron and Steel institute gathered in Cleveland on October 23, 1915 to inspect the ore docks. Similarly dressed but just for socialization, the men of the District of Columbia Bar to Bench attended their annual shad bake at Chesapeake Beach, Maryland, on May 13, 1916. Women are interspersed with the men in 1916 in front of Philadelphia's Convention Hall for the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World. Boston hosted the centenary meeting of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions between October 11 and 14, 1910.



Other groups pictured in the book are the National American Woman Suffrage Association; attendees at the Mohonk Peace Conference; the twenty-third annual conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; a contrasting Ku Klux



Klan convention, a sea of white hoods shaped like dunce caps. The Survivors of the Lawrence Massacre present a collective of a very different sort. An example of a more transitory group may be found in the 1935 photo of Inter City Beauties performing at Showmen's Variety Jubilee at Atlantic City's Steel Pier. So many people gathered for so many different reasons, but all captured in panoramic display, the individual choosing to be a member of a posed crowd and, apparently, happy to be there.

Looking at the unusually oblong group photos assembled in *The Big Picture*, I can't help recalling a similar picture taken at the end of my high school senior trip to Washington, DC. We were lined up several rows deep on a wide lawn while a camera panned from left to right to fit us all in. Walt Beyer, from the football team, was chosen to crouch down and outrace the camera to appear at both ends. Such doubling seems to be a feature of many such high-school photos from the mid twentieth century, though I didn't spot a similar antic in any of those gathered by Sapan.

But like the photograph of my graduating class—now rolled and stored somewhere in my house—those collected in *The Big Picture* remind me how almost all of the groups we belong to are equally arbitrary. Beyond the fixed relationships of the families we are born into, all others are a matter of chance and circumstance. I grew up in a certain town in a generation of men and women whose families also happened to live there. We ended up in the same schools and assembled behind desks year after year, linked as a unit until we dispersed shortly after that Washington photo. I haven't seen those people in decades, but I recall many vividly, fixed in their 18-year-old personas.

Every group I've associated with since that time has also been the outcome of arbitrary timing. Classmates in college who happened to show up in the same years. Those I've worked with and lived among. Those in my basic training company during my six-months army experience. We bunked alphabetically—Coburn, Croft, Crusade, me. Beyond relatives, all our associations are accidental. And yet, because we belong to these arbitrary groups, because they serve as sources of vital memories, they are essential in defining us.

In so many ways these groups add ballast to our lives. We're members of the class of '57, the congregation of St. Peter's Church, the Jaycees, the Steamfitters Union, scout troop 35, the Oddfellows—each a partial answer to the question, Who am I?

Most of the photographs in *The Big Picture*, however, recall a world of the past, not just because they are in black and white or because the people wear outdated clothing. So many represent organizations that no longer exist or merely linger as shells of their former prominence. The company shots speak of a time when businesses thrived for generations, and those employed assumed the businesses would endure forever; in many cases, their children followed them, taking jobs in the same buildings. I recall Croft, in the basic training bunk near mine, boasting of his employment at IBM. Though he had a minor clerical role, he exuded a real pride in being a part of that enterprise. Although IBM still exists today, it's a very different company from Croft's time, its once iconic personal computer branch sold to a Chinese company, its no layoff policy based on mutual loyalty of employer and employee also gone. A great number of other corporations and businesses of twentieth century are no longer with us, made obsolete by the rush of new technologies. Now for many, if not most of us, jobs and careers are transitory. Companies don't want the burden of loyal, long-time employees. Employees assume job insecurity. We've become a society of short-timers, keeping one eye open for other opportunities, frequently moving on—or being “let go.”

So many of the groups we belong to now are virtual, Internet associations offering asynchronous interactions rather than real-time presence. Even groups that gather in person are ephemeral, the cast of characters shifting continually, as if with the click of a mouse. The big picture has become the fragmented picture, scattered far beyond the range of any panoramic camera.

Afterword

All this is not to say that photographs of large groups are never taken today. Here's one of survivors of the Boston Marathon bombing from the one-year anniversary of the event printed on the first page of the *New York Post* of April 16, 2014.

In one sense this is an update of the “Survivors of the Lawrence Massacre” in *The Big Picture* (see below). That 1913 photo, taken fifty years after the attack by Quantrill’s Raiders, a group of Confederate guerrillas, displays men and women arranged in orderly rows, some standing, some seated, wearing white dresses and white shirts and ties, if not suit jackets.

The posed formality of 1913 and the clustered casualness of 2014 reveals much about changes in America even though people are still vulnerable to attacks—a hundred raiders with guns then, two men with homemade bombs now. It’s hard to imagine a fiftieth anniversary of the Marathon bombing in light of the many events sure to descend upon us in coming decades, leaving their own aftermath of survivors. How will they be pictured?

