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Robert H. Vance: First Photographer of California Indians?

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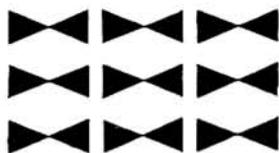
PETER E. PALMQUIST

Who was the first to photograph the California Indian? When? Because of the vicissitudes of time it is unlikely that we will ever have a truly precise answer to these provocative questions. Nor will we be certain whether this earliest likeness was taken spontaneously, or as the result of a direct, premeditated effort to document the culture of these unique people.

Most likely, however, this first "shadow-catcher" was one of the many daguerrean artists who were led to California by the promises of a newly-discovered El Dorado. One of these artists, Robert H. Vance, easily stands out as a prime candidate for the honor of being the first to focus his camera on California's Native Americans. If not the actual first, Vance surely qualifies as a very important producer of such images. During the winter and spring of 1851, he produced an extraordinary series of 300 daguerreotypes "of the largest size" showing the splendor of California.

Produced at a direct cost of \$3,000, these "Views in California" were exhibited in New York City during the fall of that same year. Vance's exhibition listing, *Catalogue of Daguerreotype Panoramic Views in California*, annotates eleven Indian "Views":

56. Indian Hut near Yuba City.
57. View of Indians of the Stanislaus River dressed for a War Dance.
62. View of Indian Commissioners, Dr. Wozencraft, Col. Johnson, Indian Agent, and clerks, in treaty with the Indians.
65. View of Indian Village on Capt. Sutter's Plantation.
66. Indian Village near Yuba City.
67. View of four Indian Chiefs, and Wife and Sister of the celebrated chief Kasuse.





Early California daguerreotypist Robert H. Vance.
Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

68. A group of Indian Chiefs on the Feather River.

- 69. Indian Village on the Stanislaus River.
- 70. Indians, cooking.
- 71. View of Indians dressed for a dance.
- 72. Indian, dancing.

In New York, the exhibition received great critical acclaim, but found little public interest. Disappointed, Vance sold his "Views in California" to daguerrean J. Gurney. After a year, Gurney sold them to John Fitzgibbon of St. Louis. They subsequently disappeared without a trace! They may long since have been destroyed—or then again they one day turn up in some attic or junk shop.

*Humboldt State University
Arcata*

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