

Hugh Emmett Denham

1857-1941

Baker City Saddle Maker and Photographer

by Gary Dielman

For several decades Hugh Denham and his partners, John Palmer and then Palmer's son Bob, operated a harness and saddle-making business located at 1706 Main Street, present site of the Chevron gas station. Baker County old-time cowboys know of Palmer and Denham saddles, which have been around since 1888. But few people are aware that Hugh Denham made a photographic chronicle of life in Baker City just after the turn of the 20th century.

Marjorie Tiedemann Reagan, granddaughter of Hugh Denham, donated to the Baker County Library her grandfather's 163 glass negatives. The library had prints made of the photos, which will be available for public viewing in the near future.



Hugh Denham

Hugh Denham was the oldest of seven children, born March 29, 1857, in Columbus City, Iowa, where he grew up. His father died when he was twelve years old and his mother died two years later. The children were dispersed to various relatives and friends of the family. Hugh learned the harness-making trade from his namesake and uncle, Hugh Little Denham.

In 1877, Denham went to Superior, Nebraska, where he lived for three years before coming to Baker City, Oregon, in September 1880. In 1884 he married

Margaret “Maggie” Gooding in Baker City. Maggie was born March 30, 1866, in New London, Quebec, Canada, to English and Scottish parents. The couple spent two years in Pueblo, Colorado, where their first child, Margaret “May” Denham was born June 11, 1885.

In 1915, May married Dr. Albert William Tiedemann. Dr. Tiedemann, who was born March 20, 1884, in Roy, Washington. graduated from Oregon Medical School in Portland, Oregon, and practiced medicine in Baker City. In 1904, May taught in the one-room log cabin school of the Stewart School District in Bowen Valley just south of Baker City. For a short time she was principal of South Baker School, which in later years was called Tiedemann School, named for her husband, Dr. Albert Tiedemann, who was a school board member. Al and May Tiedemann’s daughter, Marjorie Tiedemann Reagan, lives in Halfway and their son, retired dentist Dr. Albert Tiedemann, Jr., resides in Baker City.

The spelling of the name Tiedeman(n) alternated between having one and two “n’s.” Marjorie Tiedemann Reagan says the legal name is with two “n’s,” but the family dropped the second “n” from the name during WWI, so it would not look so German. Her brother, Al, restored the lost “n” after he was required to use his legal name when he entered the service in WWII.



Hugh’s Wife Maggie Denham and Sons

Hugh Denham took most of his photographs between 1905 and 1915 using 5” x 7” glass negatives, although he used celluloid film for some of his later photos. Modern photography has nothing that beats a well-focussed glass negative for sharpness of detail when making enlargements. Many of Denham’s photos possess great clarity, such as the 5” x 7” glass negative showing Denham’s living room with a piano in one corner. On the piano is the three-eighths-inch-high image of a sheet of music. When the tiny image is enlarged to a height of four inches, one sees it is an etude entitled *Under the Mistletoe* composed by H. Engelmann, and every note is readable. Stunning detail may also be seen in an enlargement of the gleaming metal of the Wilson heating stove standing on the opposite side of the room.

Denham's photos contain other interesting details which may have held little interest for Denham. A close look at a photo from the Spring Garden Street hill, which Denham may have taken to show extensive flooding north of town, reveals a baseball game being played on a field a block southwest of the old brick Brooklyn School. In a photo taken in the sleeping quarters of the Baker City Fire Department about 1910, where Denham's son Bob was a volunteer, the discerning eye will notice a nude pen-up on the wall. In a related photo taken of the fire crew and the fire wagon, one just manages to make out the head of one of the two fire horses, Brig and Eagle, peering out of its stall.

The richness of the Denham photo collection is in the variety of Baker City subjects which Denham captured with his camera in the years just before WWI. There are series of photos of Denham's house and neighborhood, his saddles and harnesses, camping, including car camping, ice skating on Powder River, Baker City park, children playing, a train wreck, Mt. Hope Cemetery, farming, fishing, and an excursion boat on Wallowa Lake.



Hugh Denham Saddle

Denham was proud of his saddles. He photographed a half dozen different saddles individually posed seemingly suspended in mid air before a stark white background. The saddles were of all styles—minimally decorated work saddles, fancy saddles with lots of leather tooling, and ladies sidesaddles—plus all types of harnesses and other tack. A couple of photos show the inside of the saddle shop with all the leather working equipment. Dale Hugh Denham of Richland, Washington, grandson of Hugh Denham, wrote in his genealogy of the Denham

family that the shop used to make tops for carriages. Then when cars came along they made tops for cars.

Denham had one of the first cars in Baker City, an REO make of about 1905 vintage with a license that read "ORE 994," which may have meant it was the 994th car licensed in Oregon. It had wooden-spoke wheels, headlights mounted about wheel high to each side of the square-front hood, plus two lantern-like lights mounted high at the back end of the hood. The steering wheel was on the right side of the front seat, and passengers in the back seat rode about a head higher than occupants of the front seat. There was a fold-down leather top but no windshield or bumpers. Available to the right hand of the driver was a bulb attached to a tube leading to the horn located just under the right lantern.



Parade Photo Taken from Roof
of Palmer & Denham Saddle Shop

Entrance to the front seat of the vehicle must have been from the left, for sticking up right in the middle of the right side above the running board was a three-foot-long emergency brake lever. An apparent Fourth of July photo of the car shows it sitting in front of the Denham home draped in white sheets covered with garlands of roses, plus a United States flag attached to each headlight. Even the wheels were decked out with Roses.

Denham photographed a Fourth of July parade from the roof of his saddle shop showing fancy floats turning the corner at Main and Auburn heading north up Main Street with the newly-erected Baker City Hall in the background. The most impressive float was sponsored by the Weil department store, drawn by two white horses with tassels on their heads and wavy manes. The driver was clothed all in white as well as were perhaps forty girls, each with a white umbrella shading her from the noon-day sun. In the middle of the float was a huge basket

around which sat half of the girls. The other half sat in the basket in circles on two levels under the basket handle.

One series of eight photos shows a freight train wreck a few miles east of Baker City, which was in the process of being cleared away. The engine, tender, and mail car are lying on their sides. Some of the freight cars are nothing but a pile of rubble. Surprisingly the crew of about sixty men repairing track all appear to be African-Americans.

Perhaps the most poignant photograph in the Denham collection is the one of a child's flower-bedecked casket on a stand in the bay window area of the Denham home. Propped up on a chair to the left of the casket is the photo of two girls. It may be assumed that the older girl is May Denham and that the younger girl is Hugh Denham's fourth child, Ethel Ester Denham, who died May 2, 1900, at age seven. Another photo shows Denham's youngest child, Lloyd, at about age four standing at his sister's grave located in the east end of the protestant portion of Mt. Hope Cemetery.



Casket of Ethel Denham, age 7
Denham Living Room, 1507 3rd Street

The Denham photo collection will be shown on the large-screen TV at the next Baker County Historical Society program at 7 p.m. on Monday, September 14th at the Oregon Trail Regional Museum, 2480 Grove St. The program is free to Society members and the public.

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