

On the Frontier of Photography: Carl Lumholtz and the Kodak Snapshot Camera

Author(s): Phyllis La Farge

Source: *Journal of the Southwest*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Winter 2013), pp. 473-494

Published by: Journal of the Southwest

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24394941>

Accessed: 07-03-2019 23:17 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Journal of the Southwest is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the Southwest*

On the Frontier of Photography: Carl Lumholtz and the Kodak Snapshot Camera

PHYLLIS LA FARGE

In September 1890 the Norwegian naturalist and ethnographer Carl Lumholtz crossed the border into Mexico from Bisbee, Arizona. He was embarking on an expedition that in time would be the first of four, leading from the states of Sonora and Chihuahua as far south as Michoacán. Underlying his commitment to this venture was his experience as an explorer in Queensland, Australia. There, between 1880 and 1884, sponsored by the Zoological Museum in Christiania (as Oslo was then called), he collected plant and animal specimens. While spending the better part of a year in the remote Herbert River region, he came to appreciate the aboriginal people of the area, valuing their help and their knowledge of local flora and fauna. Having gone to Australia as a botanist and zoologist, he returned to Norway, a would-be ethnographer. Several years passed, however, before he decided on a way to pursue this new professional direction. As he subsequently wrote in *Unknown Mexico*, his account of his Mexican travels:

I first conceived the idea of an expedition to Mexico while on a visit to London in 1887. I had, of course, as we all have, heard of the wonderful cliff-dwellings in the Southwest of the United States, of entire villages built in caverns on steep mountain-sides, accessible in many cases only with the aid of ladders. Within the territory of the United States there were, to be sure, no survivors of the race that had once inhabited those dwellings. But the Spaniards, when first discovering and conquering that district, are said to have come

PHYLLIS LA FARGE is an editor and writer. Her most recent book, with photographs by Magdalena Caris, is *Painted Walls of Mexico* (Mexico, D.F.: Turner Libros, 2008).

She has cataloged the archive of Lumholtz photographs at the American Museum of Natural History and has contributed two essays to the forthcoming book *Among Unknown Tribes: Rediscovering the Photographs of Explorer Carl Lumholtz* (Austin: University of Texas Press, May 2014)

Journal of the Southwest 55, 4 (Winter 2013) : 473–494

upon dwellings then still occupied. Might there not, possibly, be descendants of the people yet in existence in the northwestern part of Mexico hitherto so little explored?¹

It is not clear what individuals, lectures, or readings may have inspired him during his London visit but his decision can be understood in the context of the increasing interest at the time in the anthropology and archaeology of the American Southwest. In 1879, in an early effort to promote serious study of Native Americans, John Wesley Powell, the geologist and explorer who became the founding director of the Bureau of Ethnology—later the American Bureau of Ethnology—sent the anthropologists John Stevenson; his wife, Matilda Coxe Stevenson; and Frank Hamilton Cushing to study the Zuni Indians. The same year saw another milestone in the growing attention to the past and present of the area, the founding of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA). The first president of the institute, the art historian Charles Eliot Norton (and others), favored a focus on the archaeology of ancient Greece and Egypt—wasn't the investigation of ancient "high cultures" far more important than excavating the paltry remains of peoples whose descendants were still only a few steps above savagery? But the historian Francis Parkman (who had lived for a period with the Sioux Indians) and Frederick Ward Putnam, director of Harvard University's Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, were successful in pressing to make American archaeology one of the goals of the institute. At the suggestion of the pioneering anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, this policy led to the choice of the scholar-archaeologist Adolph Bandelier to explore and document archaeological sites in the Southwest. As early as February 1880, however, even before the AIA had made a firm commitment to sponsoring him in the Southwest, Bandelier had already conceived of extending his work into Mexico, thus prefiguring Lumholtz's plan of ten years later.² It's reasonable to surmise that these and other developments³ were known to Lumholtz. They may well have inspired his decision and led him to meet with Bandelier and to visit the Zuni before his entry into Mexico in 1890.

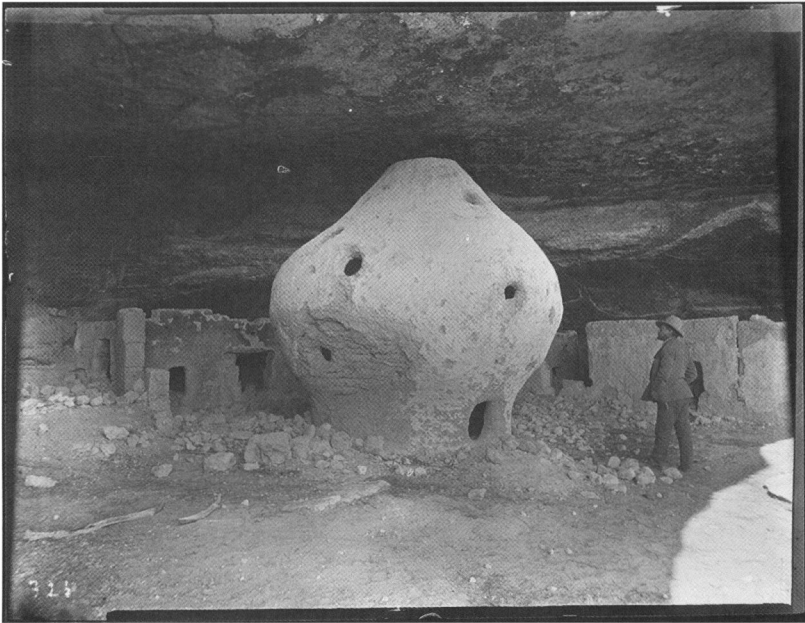
With his wish to find in Mexico the descendants of the builders of cliff dwellings north of the border Lumholtz hoped to establish a lost link not only between past and present but—perhaps less explicitly—what had become politically separate worlds, the North American Southwest and the northwest of Mexico. He did not succeed, although at the close of his first Mexican expedition in 1891 and early in his second, in 1892,

he visited the remains of ancient buildings in caves and rock overhangs in Chihuahua that possessed architectural motifs and the structural sophistication similar to those found in ruins north of the border (figs. 1 and 2). But the ethnographer in him was searching for people, not buildings, and he concluded that the nearby Tarahumara Indians could not be descendants of the earlier architects. In *Unknown Mexico* he wrote: “Are these cave-dwellers related to the ancient cliff-dwellers in the southwestern part of the United States and northern Mexico? Decidedly not.”⁴ Their technology was very simple and although some of the Tarahumara he encountered as he traveled deeper into the Sierra Madre lived for at least part of the year in caves they did so as single families, with no sign of the kind of communal organization necessary to build structures such as those at Mesa Verde. (Decades would pass before it was understood that the ancient ruins he visited had, in fact, been built by indigenous peoples from the North American Southwest when they moved south, abandoning cliff dwellings such as Mesa Verde.)

Although Lumholtz was disappointed in failing to reach what he had defined as his original goal, his achievements in the course of his four Mexican expeditions ending in 1898 are remarkable. With the exception of Bandelier’s brief trip—mostly archaeological in its emphasis—the



fig. 1

*fig. 2*

indigenous cultures of the north of Mexico had been virtually unstudied at the end of the 19th century and the region itself only thinly traveled by explorers.⁵ Ever more engrossed in the study of the tribes he encountered as he traveled south, not only the Tarahumara but the Southern Pima, Tepehuán, Cora, and Huichol, Lumholtz took virtually the first step toward an acquaintance with cultures that would not be studied more thoroughly until the 20th century. Always primarily a traveler-explorer in late-19th-century style, he nevertheless became the ethnographer he had wanted to be ever since Australia. The fruit of this work took several forms. One was the landmark collection of ethnographic objects, 2,475 in all, which became the property of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, the sponsor of his four Mexican expeditions.⁶ But another was a collection of a very different sort: more than 2,500 photographs that also became the property of the museum.

LUMHOLTZ AS A PHOTOGRAPHER

Lumholtz is not known to have taken any photographs while he was in Australia but by the time he went to Mexico it was clear to him that

photography was a valuable tool in ethnographic and anthropological work. After his return from Australia he wrote, “To reach the part of northern Queensland that I visited . . . , take a horse, and carry your supplies of dried beef, flour, tobacco, and if you are a naturalist, implements of taxidermy, photographic camera, and other such apparatus, as experience suggests you will need, and strike into the interior.”⁷ Lumholtz’s Mexican photographs include landscapes, portraits of mestizos he met on his way, and particular plants and trees. But most important are more than 500 images of the indigenous peoples of northwest Mexico, the earliest extensive photographic record of these tribes. (A substantial selection of these images is included in *Among Unknown Tribes: Rediscovering the Photographs of Explorer Carl Lumholtz*, University of Texas Press, May 2014.)

While in Mexico Lumholtz used several large-format cameras producing 5” x 7” and 6” x 8” images but he also used two of the early Kodaks, the No. 2, marketed beginning in 1889, and the No. 4, first marketed the same year (fig. 3; No. 2 at left). The realization of the Kodak camera as a commercial product was largely the work of a contemporary of Lumholtz’s, George Eastman.⁸ As a young man Eastman was an amateur photographer during his leisure time from his job as an assistant bookkeeper at the Rochester Savings Bank in Rochester, New York. He bought his first camera in 1877 but it used wet plates, which required a great deal of equipment for any photographic outing—not only the camera but a tripod, a portable darkroom, glass plates, and the utensils necessary for coating the plates with a collodion and silver nitrate emulsion before their exposure. Frustrated, Eastman wrote, “It seemed that one ought to be able to carry less than a pack horse load.”⁹ He set out to achieve this, first by furthering the development of existing dry-plate technology, but by 1884 he was determined to replace glass plates with some form of film moved forward on a roll holder. Under his direction the necessary technology developed fast, and late in 1887 he had achieved his goal with the invention of the first Kodak. Held against the user’s chest, it weighed a mere 22 ounces, measured 6¾” x 3¾” x 3¾”, and used a nitro-celluloid paper-backed film carried on a built-in roll holder. (Starting late in 1889 transparent celluloid nitrate film replaced the paper-backed film.) Exposure time was 1/25th of a second. Now the “pack horse load” was a thing of the past: gone were the tripod, the heavy glass plates, and the field darkroom. Eastman had achieved the simplicity that facilitated mass marketing. For the first time it was easy for amateurs to be photographers. The snapshot was born.

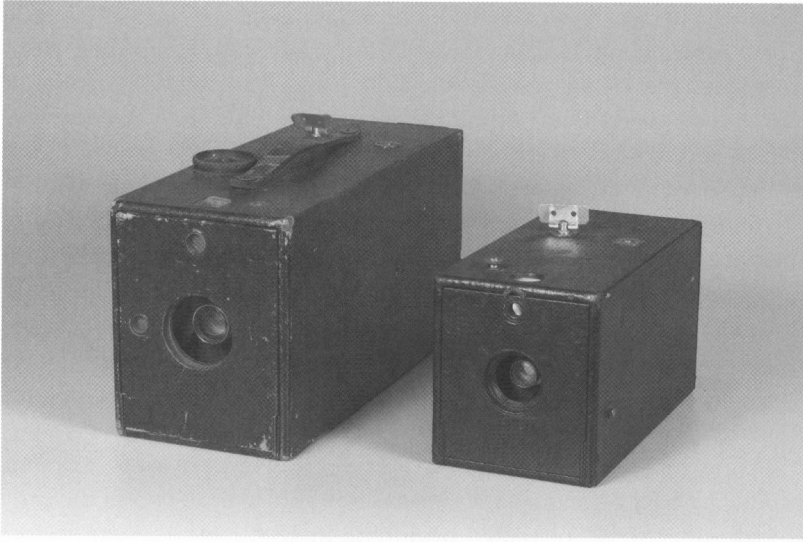


fig. 3

The cultural critic and historian Nancy Martha West has summarized these advances and pinpointed what was unique about the Kodak:

In the early 1880s, dramatic improvements were made in exposure time, the invention of dry plates reducing the length of exposures to roughly two or three seconds per plate. What *was* new with the invention of the Kodak camera and roll film was the simplicity with which one could take such an abundance of “instant” images: movement could now be divided into moments, literally 100 moments on one roll of film.¹⁰

LUMHOLTZ’S USE OF THE KODAK

Despite their frequent technical imperfections, I believe that Lumholtz’s Kodak images are among the most valuable part of his legacy and the least appreciated. Although all his photographs of indigenous peoples in Mexico are invaluable documents, his 100-odd Kodaks are the most informal introduction to the tribes he met, offering the possibility of insight into the lived lives of the Indians in a way that posed photographs cannot. One example, for instance, made possible by the “division into moments,” are three Kodak images (figs. 4, 5, and 6) of the Tarahumara



fig. 4



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7

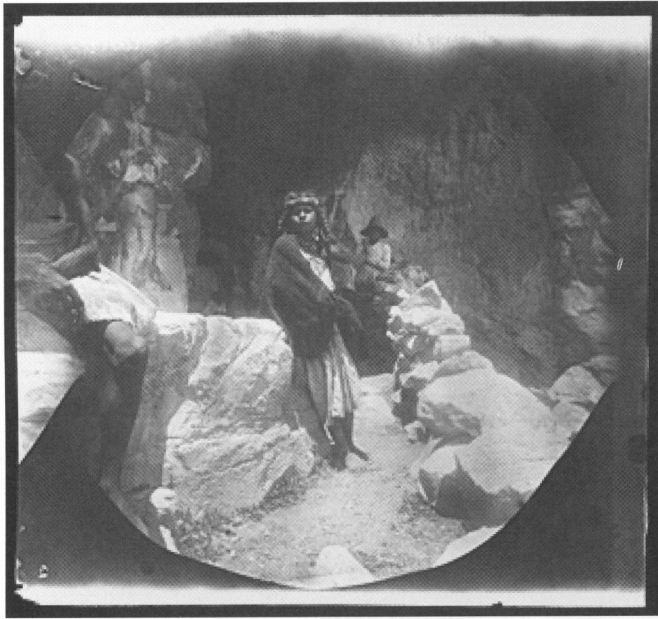


fig. 8

Indians' favorite sport, a foot race in which a small ball is kicked forward by one runner and then kicked onward by another runner who catches up with it. With his Kodak, Lumholtz was able to capture the rapid progress of the runners in a way that prefigures the movie camera.

Another example is a full image of the seated man (fig. 7) whose legs are shown in another photo of a young woman at the entrance to the cave or rock overhang (fig. 8). Clearly with the Kodak it was possible to turn from the woman to the man—or vice versa—easily and rapidly.

It seems clear that Lumholtz had the No. 2 Kodak with him when he crossed into Mexico from Bisbee in 1890. Supporting this interpretation are two Kodak images that picture several expedition members, one standing in high grasses (fig. 9), and then two others at a distance silhouetted against the sky on a hilltop (fig. 10). This first expedition included a large team of scientists and their assistants whereas the subsequent expeditions were far smaller, allowing Lumholtz a better chance of engaging the indigenous people he met. The figure in the high grass and those on the hilltop are likely to have been members of the first expedition: It's hard to believe that members of the second expedition, a much smaller group more tightly led by Lumholtz himself, would have moved about the countryside so casually. Moreover, from the point of



fig. 9

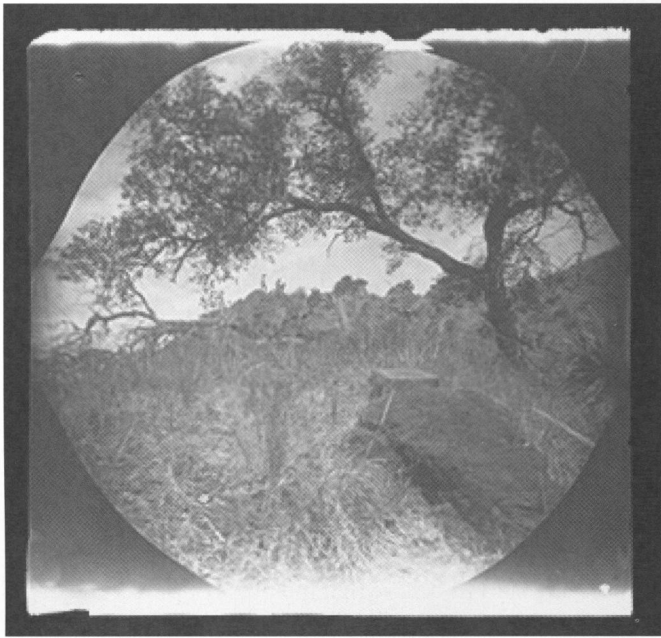


fig. 10

view of photographic technique, the image of the figure in the high grass is “amateurish,” that is, viewed from too far away to be effective, a frequent error of beginning photographers. The intent of the “hilltop” shot is “amateurish” in a different way. The figures silhouetted against the sky are so small that they seem incidental. In the foreground a wooden box, possibly containing photographic equipment for large-format photographs, lies on the ground beside a rock but nothing much has been made visually of its presence so that it, too, appears incidental. Both pictures suggest that Lumholtz was taking first steps in getting to know By the time of his second Mexican expedition Lumholtz was working with the No. 4 Kodak as well as the No 2. Although it is possible that he already owned the No. 4 Kodak in 1890–1891, there are no images from the first expedition taken with it. However, he certainly had it when he returned to Mexico late in 1891 and early in 1892 and ventured deep into the Chihuahua territory of the Tarahumara Indians, taking the first photographs not only of the Tarahumara men’s foot race but the women’s race (fig. 11) in which a ball or small wreath is propelled forward by a forked stick. The photos of the men’s race are somewhat out of focus, and in those of the women’s race Lumholtz, still something of a beginner, stands too far away to gain maximum dramatic effect.¹² But the pictures



fig. 11

of both races are unposed images of indigenous people's culture unsurpassed for their period.

Gradually Lumholtz became a more skillful photographer. In the 1892 picture of the young Tarahumara woman in the rock-lined approach to what may be a cave or rock overhang (see fig. 8) Lumholtz stands only a few feet from her. He no longer seems to be merely "trying out" a piece of equipment that was new to him; there is a surer intent to each photograph. Some of this new proficiency may have been the result of guidance from a certain G. H. Taylor,¹³ a photographer and surveyor who accompanied him for the first six months of 1892. During this time Taylor himself took a number of photographs that are part of the Lumholtz archive at the American Museum of Natural History¹⁴ but it appears likely that he also tutored Lumholtz in the use of the large-format camera or cameras that they had with them¹⁵ as well as made suggestions about the use of the two Kodak cameras. When Taylor left in the early summer of 1892 Lumholtz was "on his own" as the expedition photographer, and ready to be so, taking Kodaks as well as large-format photographs with a variety of themes, including landscapes, portraits of individual Indians and groups of Indians, anthropometric shots of Indians posed by measuring rods, and cultural settings and practices, such as his remarkable photographs of the sacred precincts of the Huichol Indians (fig. 12).



fig. 12

THE KODAK: AN ETHNOGRAPHER'S TOOL

Beyond the possibility of a rapid succession of images, what were the advantages of Lumholtz's Kodak images to his ethnographic documentation? Early snapshot photography is often considered primarily as providing a means of recording events and occasions in the lives of the family and friends of the photographer. As a result, compared with 19th-century studio photography, "what characterizes the early snapshots . . . is that informal atmosphere, familiar surroundings and familiar



fig. 13



fig. 14

company are conducive to more relaxed poses and more natural bearing and expressions.”¹⁶ But I would go further: When used ethnographically the quick and more casual nature of snapshot photography can facilitate a somewhat new relationship between the photographer and his indigenous subject. With the Kodak, the subject of the photograph is not “pinned down” in the same way by the photographer’s picture taking as he is in posed images, most notably anthropometric studies of individual

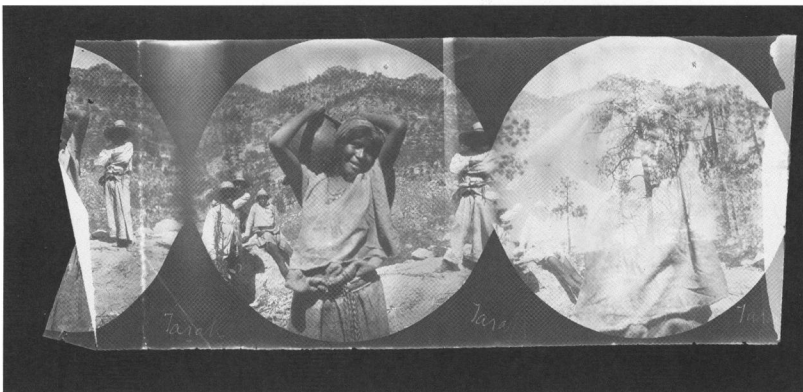


fig. 15



fig. 16



fig. 17



fig. 18

Indians posed by a measuring rod. Although with snapshot photography the photographer's subject may be caught unawares or surprised, he is likely to have more leeway to go about his business. When the photographer's intent is the documentation of the culture of indigenous people, this leeway is of particular interest and value, making it more likely that he can capture an image that is closer to the life being lived by his subject. For example, one might contrast Lumholtz's large-format photograph of the Tarahumara shaman, Rubio, posed near a measuring stick (fig. 13) with a Kodak close-up of Rubio with one arm raised in an expressive gesture (fig. 14). In the former Rubio has acquiesced to Lumholtz's demand for a certain pose and posture. In the latter one can imagine a kind of reciprocity as if the image were the outcome of an ongoing conversation between the shaman and the photographer. Lumholtz had established a friendly relationship with Rubio which may have helped him snap his close-up but even without such a relationship the greater leeway offered by the Kodak might with another subject encourage a smile (fig. 15) or, with yet another, a chance for a quite extended interchange (figs. 16, 17, and 18).

From another point of view, its simplicity of operation, light weight,



fig. 19

and fast exposure time meant that the Kodak camera could unobtrusively capture images in situations in which indigenous people could well have objected to the photographer's presence. Thus Lumholtz was able to photograph a "morning after" scene following a "tesvino," an all-night ritual occasion featuring the consumption of corn beer (fig. 19). One Indian is passed out lying on the ground and another is steadied by two of his fellows as he walks.

The fact that the Kodak was less intrusive than large-format cameras, combined with the possibility it offered of taking multiple, "instant" shots, meant that it could record sequences in daily life in a way unsurpassed until the advent of the movie camera. For example, Lumholtz snapped a series of pictures of a family of Tarahumara searching for a certain edible grub (figs. 20, 21, and 22). The women and children move about from one shot to the next, while the man of the family stays still.



fig. 20



fig. 21



fig. 22

AT THE PHOTOGRAPHIC FRONTIER

It is not clear that Lumholtz fully grasped the ethnographic usefulness of his Kodak images. He spent considerable time among the Huichol Indians in 1895 on his third expedition, won their trust, and took some of his most interesting photographs, but none are Kodaks. George Eastman's invention had permitted him to reach the frontier of ethnographic documentation via photography, but the outlook of his time—which favored anthropometric photographs, posed group and individual portraits, and posed pictures of activities such as arrow making and weaving (useful in the creation of museum exhibits)—may have limited his interest in stepping more extensively into new photographic terrain. It may be, too, that he continued to think of the Kodak as a “beginner's camera” and not a device to rely on for serious documentation. In any case, the discovery and possibilities of new terrain, scientific or artistic, facilitated by new technology may not be appreciated all at once; it would be years, for instance, before the snapshot's value for historical and ethnographic documentation was recognized. Only in 1977 did Brian Coe and Paul Gates write, “The snapshot, made spontaneously,

without forcing the subject, and without waiting for ideal conditions, is more satisfactory for the needs of the historian.”¹⁷ Lumholtz was an explorer and exploration implies discovery. All his photographs are records of discovery, yet the discoverer does not always fully appreciate the implications of his discoveries. It’s helpful to think of Lumholtz’s photographic achievements, including his Kodaks, as items in a long line of vital evidence going back to the early Spanish chroniclers of the north of Mexico and the American Southwest and forward to pioneering figures like John Wesley Powell, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Frank Hamilton Cushing—and onward to anthropological and archaeological work in Mexico and the North American Southwest in the 20th and 21st centuries. ❖

NOTES

¹ Carl S. Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico: A Record of Five Years’ Exploration among the Tribes of the Western Sierra Madre; in the Tierra Caliente of Tepic and Jalisco; and among the Tarascos of Michoacán*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), vol. 1, p.1. When he referred to the “wonderful cliff-dwellings” of the Southwest, Lumholtz may have had in mind the ruins of Mesa Verde, Colorado, although these were not discovered until 1888, a year after he decided on an expedition to Mexico.

² Charles H. Lange and Carroll L. Riley, *Bandelier: The Life and Adventures of Adolph Bandelier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996). See page 32.

³ At the time of Lumholtz’s first expedition to Mexico, growing interest in the archaeology of the Southwest led another Scandinavian, Gustaf Nordenskiöld (1868–1895), to visit and excavate the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde, Colorado, which had been discovered in 1888 by local ranchers Richard Wetherill and his brother-in-law, Charles Mason.

⁴ Lumholtz: *Unknown Mexico*, vol. 1, p. 170.

⁵ An exception was the explorer Frederick Schwatka, who led two expeditions to the north of Mexico in 1889 and 1890, sponsored by two Chicago publications. Schwatka traversed much of the same Chihuahua territory as Lumholtz soon would, leading to his book, *In the Land of Cave and Cliff Dwellers* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1893).

⁶ In addition to his ethnographic collection, Lumholtz donated to the American Museum of Natural History 3,105 archaeological artifacts and 683 osteological items from his Mexican expeditions. A strong interest in botany dating back to his boyhood led him to collect a large number of plant specimens as well, including 27 species new to science. Finally, his Mexican collection included 55 mammals and 1,000 birds.

⁷ Carl Lumholtz, “Australia’s Doomed Race: What a Brave Scientist Learned While among Savages,” *Boston Herald*, March 16, 1889.

⁸ Carl Lumholtz, 1851–1922; George Eastman, 1854–1932.

9. Elizabeth Breyer, *George Eastman: A Biography* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006). **[Page number for quote?]** As a reference for the quote, Breyer gives Eastman's first authorized interview, in *System* magazine (October 1920).

10. Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 62.

11 I am indebted to Ann Christine Eek, photographer and head photographic technician at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, Norway, for helping me to understand the "amateurish" nature of Lumholtz's first Kodaks.

12 Quite possibly, too, Lumholtz may have been discouraged from approaching the women runners any closer.

13 It has so far been impossible to ascertain Taylor's full first name. In *Unknown Mexico* he is referred to as "C. H." rather than "G. H." Taylor, but the American Museum of Natural History records suggest that "G. H." is correct and "C. H." is a typographical error.

14 These have been identified by Taylor's distinctive handwriting on the negatives. This was detected by Ann Christine Eek while comparing negatives from the American Museum of Natural History with a handwritten article signed "The Photographer of the Expedition" in the Lumholtz collections of the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

15 The information about the large-format cameras Lumholtz had with him on his expeditions is scanty. Ann Christine Eek mentions in particular "a fairly advanced 6¼ by 8¼" English camera from Perken, Son, & Rayment and a 4" x 5" Hawkeye. See "Carl Lumholtz and His Photographs" by Ann Christine Eek in *Among Unknown Tribes: Rediscovering the Photographs of Explorer Carl Lumholtz* (Austin: University of Texas Press, May 2014).

16 Karl Steinworth, "Photography for Everyone: The Beginning of Snapshot Photography," in *You Press the Button, We Do the Rest: The Birth of Snapshot Photography*, edited by Colin Ford and Karl Steinworth (London: Dirk Nishen Publishing, in association with the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, 1988).

17 Brian Coe and Paul Gates, *The Snapshot Photograph: The Rise of Popular Photography, 1888–1939* (London: Ash & Grant, 1977), p. 28.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank Tom Baione, director of the Research Library at the American Museum of Natural History, and Barbara Mathe, archivist at the library, for giving me the opportunity to catalog the Lumholtz photographic archive at the museum. I owe thanks as well to the following individuals who helped me in the preparation of this essay: Ann Christine Eek, photographer/head technician at the Department of Documentation, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo,

Norway; Todd Gustavson, curator of technology, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York; Joe R. Struble, archivist, George Eastman House; and finally, and especially, to Bill Broyles, author, editor, and research associate at the Southwest Center, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.