

## Synopsis

During the Westward expansion of North America, hordes of hopeful European immigrants arrived on the East coast.

They gambled what little resources they had to join the rush to the promised lands of the West. They rode roughshod over the already established Mexican and Native populations. The promise of free land and gold tempted all kinds of innocents and rogues to try their luck "Out West".

Amongst this colourful lot, there were journalists and photographers. They set themselves up in frontier towns or traveled through the wilderness to record this momentous period in the history of the nascent nation. Thousands from the motley bunch of characters sat for portraits to send back to their countries of origin or to those they had left behind. They wanted to show family members, loved ones and friends that they were prospering out West. Photographers kept a limited wardrobe of "decent clothes" for anyone who did not possess a suit or a dress to create this illusion of wellbeing and prosperity.

The journalists and photographers of this period were major contributors to the creation of the mythology of the west as we know it today. Add to that the aggrandisement of the myth by Hollywood and we are all prey to a misconception about the reality of the life in the Wild West. We are mostly also blind to the massive injustice that the move west constitutes to all ethnic minorities of the North American nation, the cruelty and violence against non-whites and women was endemic, and is rarely if ever fully reported or understood today. It is only in very recent times that these issues have begun to be discussed in movies and popular culture. Still nowhere near enough has been done to rectify this misrepresentation and obfuscation.

In this series my intent is to pay homage to the studio portraits of this era, as seen by the photographers of frontier towns and settlements.

## Historical Notes

The nature of history seems to be that the truth does belong to the victors, to bend and shape to their own advantage. Throughout the existence of humanity we have been a story telling species. Historians are our soothsayers and story tellers. And historians are not immune to the jingoism of nationalism and political self interest.

Because of this, partly, the real history of the so called Wild West has rarely been told accurately or in full. At least until quite recently the massive contribution of non-white Americans was at best ignored and at worst deliberately omitted or maybe worse still distorted to suit a narrative where the white man was the civiliser, the saviour, the innovator, the superior man. The struggles and achievements and contributions of the non-white population were therefore made non-existent.

Often forgotten also are the millions of dirt poor white people who were used in the same way more or less as the non-whites. Mostly itinerant workers, what came to be known as hobos in the Thirties, they were more or less of the same status as slaves or indentured workers. Travelling and doing what they could to survive, they were mostly involved in short term toil.

Yet these people, the African-Americans, the Chinese and Japanese Americans and the so called Red Necks, the Irish and so on were the very people who fought the wars and built and serviced the railways and roads that were the essential engine of the United States as it inexorably expanded westward.

Possibly the people who were worst off in this mix were women. Huge numbers through poverty, widowhood or desperation were forced into a life of prostitution, and violent abuse against poor women was a daily reality. Some managed to pull themselves up and out of this life through hard work and intelligent diligence. Some took to the way of the gun. Others still found sanctuary in religious fanaticism.

## **Methodology of Concept**

In this series my main intent is not to faithfully and accurately represent this history in a way that attempts to emulate the times authentically; that would mean a massive budget and many props and accessories which unfortunately are not within my scope. Instead I would like to create images with styling that is authentic in feel, and evokes the feeling of that historical phase.

I also see a deeper intent here. I believe very strongly that the political and social situation we find ourselves in at this time in history, is almost an exact mirror of that older period. Lawlessness and the tragic emergence of old divisions, racially and politically in our present circumstance have baffled and shocked me. The move to the extremes of right wing and Fascistic attitudes, the financial burden being placed on already poor people, the naked abuse of freedoms, gained over centuries of struggle are so obvious now that it almost defies imagination.

I see this series, by being set in the style of that time, as a personal statement of how far backwards we have suddenly gone. Ignoring human rights, rampant racism, obscene wealth dominating tragic poverty, propagandist governments propagating clear and obvious lies to dominate and subdue the majority; not to mention the criminal attitude towards environmental catastrophe; all are so reminiscent of that period in the history of the western democracies, that it defies belief.

## **Styling and Approach**

From a technical point of view, my decision on how to approach the work is as follows:

I regard this series more or less in the same manner as a cinematic piece; with diverse characters, each with their own story line. In this sense some of the characters would be equivalent to main actors in a movie, while others would constitute the supporting and sundry

cast. This way the finished project would ideally tell a complete story of the life of these characters both individually and as the whole narrative for a scenario that hits all the targets of the concept/project.

Because of budget restrictions and in fact the lack of financial resources, every one who works with me here would work because they want to and not for pay. I am deeply sorry for this, but hope that whoever gives their time and effort would have fun and some really exciting portraits to keep at the end of it all. In spite of these restrictions, we have managed to gather a good deal of appropriate props and clothes to help in the styling, and if those who get involved also have access to, or own items that match the style, I would be grateful to use them.

At the time of writing the main things missing are a choice of weapons of the period, hats and uniforms. But I am actively searching for these. If anyone can lend any of these items, I would be eternally grateful.

My intention is to make the series something that can possibly become either an exhibition or a book or, ideally, both.

I thank everyone who joins me in achieving this goal in advance. Above all I hope we all have a great deal of fun dressing up and playing characters.