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Anna Oleson Heighstedt: Early Minneapolis Photographer

Joanne Halsey*

In an article written by Barbara Flanagan about photography in Minneapolis in the last half of the nineteenth century, my grandmother, Mrs. John H. Oleson, was listed among the photographers.¹ Barbara wondered if she was “a liberated woman photographer.” So did I! Thus began my research and interest in the life of Anna G. Johnson.

Anna was born in Sweden in 1856. She came to the United States when she was thirteen years old to be with uncles who were building row houses in the Saint Anthony area of Minneapolis. She attended private school in Minneapolis and married John H. Oleson when she was eighteen years old.

John H. Oleson was born in Norway in 1850 and came to the United States in 1866, at the age of sixteen. When he was twenty years old, he started to work for W. H. Jacoby Gallery, an early Minneapolis photographer. Four years later, in 1874, John Oleson opened his own establishment at 305 Washington Avenue South, specializing in card and cabinet photography. That same year, John and Anna were married.

According to a listing in the Minneapolis Directory, John Oleson moved his gallery to a larger one at 307 Washington Avenue South, because he needed more space. As the young couple prospered, so did their family. Three sons—Willie, Gustave and Albert—were born to Anna and John. In 1880 John Oleson built his own gallery at 226-228 Washington Avenue South, across from the Milwaukee Depot. The following article describes his gallery:²

WHO MAKES OUR PICTURES

AN ARTIST WHO HAS TAKEN 11,500 NEGATIVES IN THIS
CITY

A Reporter Visits the Palatial Apartments of
John H. Oleson, Photographer
226, 228 Washington Avenue South

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¹ *Minneapolis Star*, 2 March 1972.

² *Minneapolis Evening Journal*, 16 April 1881, 1.

This gentleman commenced business here as a photographer in 1874, at 305 Washington Avenue South, and in 1876 removed to 307, where he became generally known as a superior artist and was favored with such an extensive patronage that larger and more commodious rooms became a necessity, and in 1880 he erected the elegant yellow brick block he now occupies, corner of Third and Washington avenues, although he still maintains his former rooms, which are used as a tin type gallery, being the only exclusive tin type establishment in the city. Mr. Oleson's new building is 44 x 75 feet, three stories high, with a fine basement. The ground floors are leased for stores, while the other floors, except the capacious apartments occupied in connection with his gallery, are used for offices. At the head of the first stairs we enter, th[r]ough an elegantly ornamented plate glass door, the reception room about twenty-five feet square, with inlaid walnut and ash floors. The walls and ceiling were gorgeously frescoed by the well-known artist, S. P. Christensen, and hung with an elegant mirror and massive frames containing life-size, life-like photos of well-known citizens. The large center table is filled with views of many of the thousand points of interest in our city and state, and numerous easels are laden with fine pictures. An elegant silver mounted show case, standing on a handsomely finished counter, is filled with an endless variety of the excellent card and cabinet work which has made Oleson's gallery a household word all over the city and surrounding country. The operating room, 18 x 42, and the printing room, 20 x 21, besides store room for negatives, of which he has 11,500, the largest number in the city, and several other rooms all conveniently connecting, and the immense sky and side lights, built with the latest improvements, all combine to make this by far the most complete and perfect photographing establishment in the city. Mr. Oleson gives his personal attention to his entire establishment and no work is ever permitted to leave the office without passing his inspection and approval. Of course quite a number of assistants are required to enable this establishment to fill all orders promptly, and there can be no doubt but that this gallery ranks among the very best west of New York in every particular. Prices are always as low as good, honest, first-class work can be done for, and the courteous treatment of visitors, patience with children, and invariable success in his efforts to give satisfaction, continues to attract not only Mr. Oleson's Scandinavian friends in this city and St. Paul, but all classes of our people, none of whom fail to go away fully satisfied that of all the excellent photographic establishment[s] here, none can equal that of J. H. Oleson, 226, 228 Washington avenue south, for first-class photographs in all styles and sizes; crayon and India ink work, in the highest style of art; and in copying and enlarging.

In June of 1881, Anna's third child, Albert, died of typhoid. He was one and one-half years old. Two months later, her husband, John, also died of typhoid. Her two remaining sons were only six and four years old.



Fig. 1. Photograph of Anna taken by her husband, John Oleson, ca. 1874. The studio logo on the back states the following: John H. Oleson, / Photographer, / Nos. 226 & 228 Washington Ave. S. / Minneapolis, Minnesota / Duplicates may be had at any time / by giving name.

Thus Anna was thrust into the task of running the gallery and she proceeded to become one of Minneapolis's first successful female photographers. It was necessary for her to supervise the staff, who worked at the gallery, as well as do the actual photography. She also negotiated leases for a confectionery store and

rented out other space in the building. Miller Publishing Company had offices in her building at one time.

When Anna took over the gallery, the name on her photographic work became Mrs. John H. Oleson. However, sometimes it remained Oleson's. Why, I don't know. One interesting cartes de visites, which bears her name on the back, is that of her future son-in-law, Dr. Clyde A. Undine, taken in 1885 when he was a baby (see figure 3).

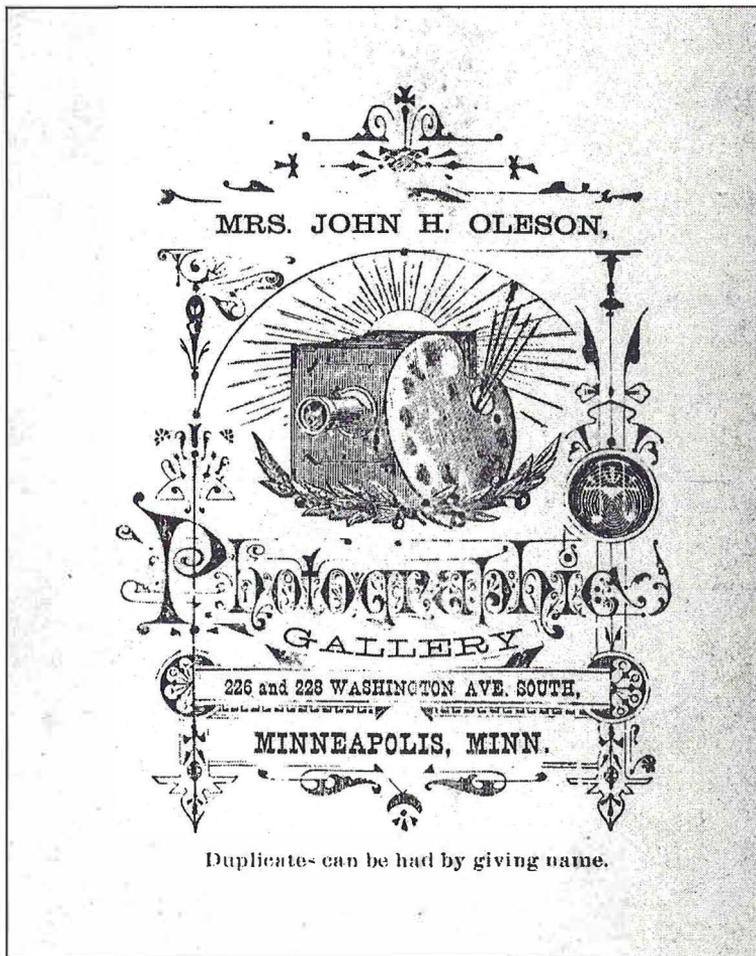


Fig. 2. Business logo on back of photograph that reads as follows: Mrs. John H. Oleson, / Photographic / Gallery / 226 and 228 Washington Ave. South, / Minneapolis, Minn. / Duplicates may be had by giving name.

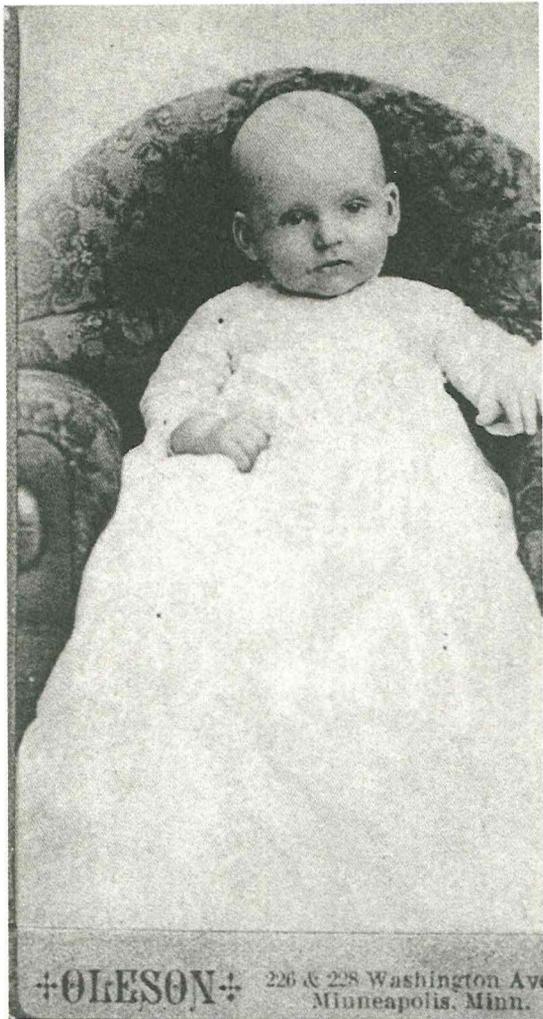


Fig. 3. Photograph of Dr. Clyde A. Undine as a baby taken by his future mother-in-law, Anna Oleson. Clyde married Anna's daughter Effie.

Many interesting things turn up when one is doing research on families. For example, I have a deed, dated 1882, of goods sold to Anna Oleson from Andrew Hogstedt. The goods were from 307 Washington Avenue South, John Oleson's second gallery site. Andrew Hogstedt was to become Anna's second husband. Apparently, he was in the photography business, too, perhaps as an assistant or associate of John Oleson or possibly he had a gallery of his own.

In 1889 Anna married Andrew Högstedt, who had changed his name to Heighstedt. Andrew was born in Carver County, Minnesota, in 1857, the son of Anders F. and Anna Maria Högstedt, Swedish immigrants from Stenberga (Smål.) who settled near East Union in Carver County in the 1850s.³ East Union was the first site of Gustavus Adolphus College. A family tale tells that during the Sioux Uprising in 1862, a five-year-old Andrew ripped his pants on barbed wire in Carver as he escaped by raft on the Minnesota River to St. Paul.



Fig. 4. Anna and Andrew Heighstedt ca. 1890. This may be their wedding photograph.

³ See James E. Erickson, "St. Ansgar's Academy, East Union, MN Students 1863-1876," *Swedish American Genealogist* XV (March 1995): 25.

Soon after Andrew and Anna were married in August of 1889, the gallery name was changed to Heighstedt. My mother was born in June 1890. From pictures we have, I believe these were happy years for Anna. She was less active at the gallery and content to stay home and raise her daughter and teenaged sons and enjoy her lovely home at 1702 Elliot Avenue South.



Fig. 5. Interior of Anna's home at 1702 Elliot Avenue South, Minneapolis.

She enjoyed beautiful clothes and jewelry. I recall my mother telling me that Anna had lunch at Christina Turnblad's new home at 2600 Park Avenue (now the American Swedish Institute). In 1893 Anna went to the Chicago Colombian Exposition and she later visited Yellowstone Park with my mother. They stayed at Old Faithful Inn and traveled by stagecoach in the park.

However, this happiness was not to last forever. Anna's son Gustave died in 1899 at the age of twenty-one and Will died in 1903. Both of the boys had tuberculosis. Anna died 20 October 1916 and was survived by her husband and daughter.