

Richard Albert Throssel (1882-1933): The First Metis Professional Photographer

Richard Throssel was born in Marengo, Washington and was of Manitoba Metis (French, Cree, English and Scottish) descent. In 1909, Richard Throssel became the first Metis in North America to be employed as a professional photographer when he was appointed as a field photographer in the Indian Service. He held this position until 1911, when he moved to Billings, Montana to establish his own studio, the Throssel Photocraft Company. Throssel's Metis roots were in Red River. His Metis grandparents, Janet (Tait) and Alexander Birston along with his mother, Mary Birston, were part of a Red River Metis emigrant party that travelled to the Columbia River in what was then the Oregon Territory (now Washington State) in 1841 in a 1700 mile expedition lead by James Sinclair.



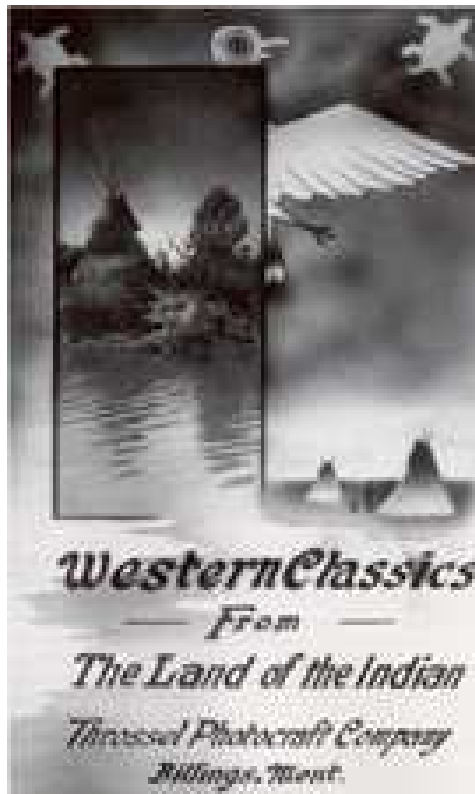
Richard Throssel

Throssel, who had rheumatism, moved to the Crow reservation in southeastern Montana in 1902 for the drier climate and to join his brother Harry as an office clerk with the Indian Service. Living next door to Throssel was the photographer Fred Miller. Miller's part-Shawnee Indian wife Emma's sister Myrtle was married to Harry Throssel. At the Crow Agency he took painting lessons from Joseph Sharp, a prominent member of the Taos Founders, as well as a skilled photographer. In 1905 he met Edward Curtis and had an artistic epiphany about the capabilities of photography. Curtis became a personal friend and mentor. Throssel contributed a few pictures to Curtis' North American Indian project and contributed images to Joseph Dixon's Wanamaker Expedition project.

Later, he and his brother were both adopted by the Crow Nation in 1905. He was given the name *Esh Quon Dupahs*, or "Kills Inside the Camp. He became their tribal

photographer, a member Montana State Legislature, National Guardsman and local National Rifle Association member.

In 1909, Commissioner for Indian Affairs R.G. Valentine appointed Throssel to be field photographer for the Crow reservation and assigned him to take documentary pictures of the tribe in a campaign against tuberculosis. Shortly afterwards he established his own photography studio, the *Throssel Photocraft Company*, in Billings, Montana.



Throssel is known for his picturesque pictorial views in the style of Curtis, and used the same platinum print papers Curtis used. Throssel also made a significant body of documentary work for the Indian Service on Indian health issues and for his friends and family, taking many informal portraits and scenes that would today call documentary style.

Throssel's photography, showed local Indians, adapted to changing circumstances, while retaining aspects of their traditional culture. The "Vanishing" Indian motif never enthralled him; instead his subjects were shown as defiant people who adapted as best they could. While Throssel continued to photograph events on the Crow Reservation, and many Crow Indians had their portraits taken at his studio, he became most well-known for his *Western Classics* brochures (see above). These were a series of 39 photos that Throssel marketed to a national audience. They were mainly in the pictorial, romanticized style that Throssel learned from Curtis.

In 1924, Richard was elected as Yellowstone County's representative to the nineteenth session of the Montana State Legislature, one of the first Metis to hold elected office in Montana at the state level. He declared his candidacy only one month after gaining the vote himself after Congress granted citizenship and voting rights to all non-citizen North American Indians born in the United States. He was elected to a second term in 1926 but was defeated in his third attempt in 1928, when he did not advance past the primary.

Reference

Albright, Peggy. *Crow Indian Photographer: The Work of Richard Throssel*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.



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