

Old Moscow Photos Reappear

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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When Cornelius Kingsley Garrison Billings, the millionaire founder of petrochemical giant Union Carbide, took his prize-winning trotters on a goodwill tour of Eastern Europe in 1909, he brought along horse-racing journalist Murray Howe to chronicle the trip in weekly dispatches to *The Horse Review* magazine.

In addition to being an able and witty journalist — his wry trotting classics “Stable Conversation” and “The Trotting Horse Excuse Book” are still read in trotting circles — Howe was also an amateur photographer.

Excerpts from a letter Howe sent home about his trip to Russia

“As to the people we met in Russia, we found them the best in the world: and we were very surprised to find that over half of them spoke a little English.”

“Our visit to Moscow was by far the most enjoyable of the whole trip. I doubt the Queen of Sheba had a much better time in the court of King Solomon than our trotting Queen, Lou Dillon, had in Moscow. For hundreds of years the racing of trotting horses has been the

greatest of all sports in the land of the Czar.”

“The Russians have adopted all that’s best from the English, French and German kitchens, and of course added some of their own.”

“The zakouski [appetizers] table has no seats, you simply walk up and take a plate and a fork — then you spear a couple of bites of caviar, a pickled sterlet’s fin, a toasted sturgeon’s ear and a liberal portion of sunflower salad. All this you wash down with a small whiskey glass full of vodka. If you are thirsty you can increase the number of vodkas without drawing attention.”

“Of course, we had heard much about the Moscow racing plant, and the enormous numbers of horses trained over the track: but we were not prepared for the sight we saw as we turned, one fine morning, from a road into the enormous square, where the horses are hitched and cooled out. This space, one eighth of a mile wide and a half mile long was filled with a mass of horses, some to carts and sulkies, and others walking under blankets. There were close to one thousand in sight: so we estimated. Just imagine, if you can, a thousand trotters in a cooling-out paddock!”

“You have doubtless heard that the Russian people are hospitable, but you must visit the country to realize the limits to which they can go when they set out to entertain and do honors to a welcome guest. Their program of entertainment for Mr Billings and his party commenced with his arrival and ended with his departure four days later, with only a few short breathing spells ... between three o’clock in the morning and daylight.”

Howe snapped more than 400 photographs in Moscow and St. Petersburg with his handheld Graflex camera, a state-of-the-art device that allowed its user to shoot without a tripod. His photographs of pedestrians, street vendors and aristocrats are rare glimpses of everyday life before the upheavals of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution — and sparked huge interest in Russia among history buffs and local museums.

The photographs re-emerged a few months ago when Howe’s great-grandson, Andrew Howe V of Atlantic Beach, Florida, posted about 75 of them on his Flickr account. A link soon appeared on the popular EnglishRussia blog, and the photographs started popping up in the Russian blogosphere. “I never thought it would go this berserk,” Howe said by telephone from Florida, where he works as a real estate developer. The Flickr page has had more than 100,000 hits.

“They’re rare, they’re especially high quality, simply super-quality,” said Irina Levina, an amateur historian, who posted a link to the photos on her LiveJournal blog.

Howe focused on people at a time when most Russian photographers were shooting buildings and monuments. “He loved the people most. ... He thought the people of Russia were the most quality people in the world,” his great-grandson said.

In one image, a shoe repairman dressed in rags cheekily mimes his craft to the delight of nearby children against the Kremlin's soaring spires. Others capture various vendors and vagabonds, while still others are devoted to the aristocrats that filled Moscow's hippodrome to see Lou Dillon — the first horse to trot a mile in less than two minutes — and C.K.G. Billings' other prize horses run. (In trotting, horses racing at a trot pull a driven two-wheeled vehicle called a sulky around a track.)

“When I look at these photographs, I want to get in there and talk to these people. Just have normal, everyday conversations with them. It's easy to imagine,” said Alexander Frolov, a historian with the architecture preservation organization Arkhnadzor.

There are also photographs of buildings, including one of the original Christ the Savior Cathedral with a handwritten remark about how expensive it was to build. Another shows soldiers marching through a much grimmer Red Square than the one we know today; a layer of soot covers the iconic onion domes on St. Basil's Cathedral.

“We don't have anything quite like these photographs,” said Vladimir Kuznetsov, head of exhibitions at the Moscow City Museum, referring to his museum's collection of more than 100,000 images. “The photographers featured in our collection were typically on contract to photograph monuments, architecture, because they knew the city was growing — capitalism — old estates and houses were being destroyed.”

In addition to 400 photographs, some annotated, Murray Howe left behind letters to home, articles, negatives and a scrapbook.

Some of Howe's dispatches could have been written yesterday: “The only people were afraid of the camera were the police, and they made me put the machine back in its case. ... It was easy sailing however, as I always got the picture I was after before the nearest cop would get his eye on me,” he wrote.

Andrew Howe's dream is to exhibit the images in Russia. But despite the buzz and gushing appraisals, no museums or galleries have offered to pay for an exhibition.

“I love the idea of having these things accessible to the same cross-section of Moscow that he was so in love with,” Howe said.

76 of the Moscow series are on Flickr at www.flickr.com/photos/cranewoods/sets/72157626191454674/. For more information about the collection, contact Andrew Howe V at Ahowe@cranewoods.com.

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