

the Photographer

JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTORS ASSOCIATION

AFFILIATED WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY

NUMBER 63

P. O. BOX 4294 - WHITTIER, CA 90607

SUMMER 1984

[Annotated 2022]

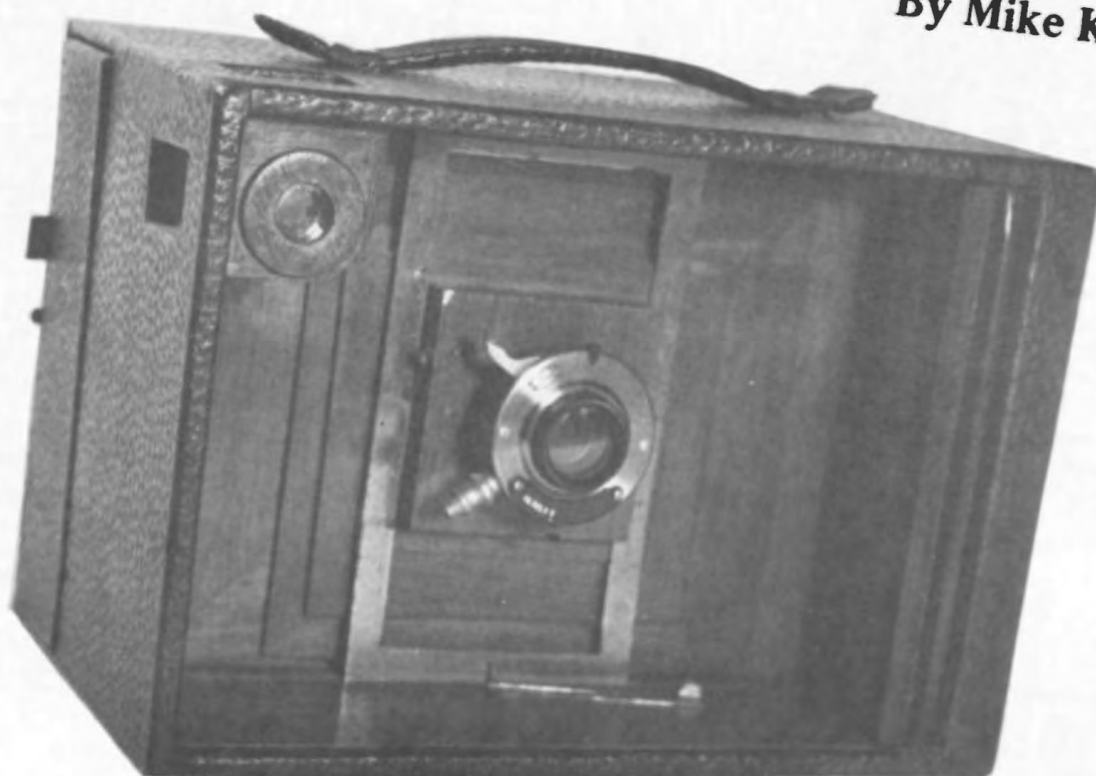


This document, courtesy of Gladys Kessler, is an online supplement to 2022 *New England Journal of Photographic History*, available at <https://www.magcloud.com/browse/magazine/876415>



THE FINAL WING

By Mike Kessler



Ten years ago we were all younger and less sophisticated and camera collecting was just getting up steam. It was one of those events that make you compare foresight with hindsight, where foresight comes up short. An image collector in Massachusetts made the acquaintance of David Wing Nilsson, great grandson of Simon Wing, the famous camera manufacturer. The news slowly leaked out that Mr. Wing Nilsson had a large number of his famous relative's cameras and wanted to sell same. The price wasn't that much but for some reason several dealers and collectors who looked at the collection couldn't bring themselves to "spring for it." Eventually, as these things go, the cameras were sold individually to a number of collectors.

When I found out about all this I set out to recollect as many of the Wing cameras as I could, a venture that has earned me the title of "wing-nut." I was soon able to acquire an example of nearly every one of the cameras from the Wing estate, including Simon Wing's personal multiplying camera, a solid Rosewood, nine-lens beauty which dates from around 1870. One of the most fascinating cameras in the collection, however, was a small, black leather box. To appreciate the importance of this camera let me digress for a moment and explain just what a Wing camera is.

Ask any collector of early American cameras to pick a favorite or two off the shelf and chances are he'll show you at least one Wing camera. Even sophisticated European collectors who prize few American cameras will proudly display an original Kodak and a Simon Wing camera.

Simon Wing, a daguerreotypist from Waterville, Maine, produced an amazing variety of cameras over a period of 40 years or so, most of which were designed to make more than one photo per exposure.

The whole thing started when the early studio photographers realized they could increase their profits by selling a number of photos to each sitter. At this time lenses were extremely expensive so rather than use more than one lens, some daguerreian photographers like Albert Southworth experimented with movable camera backs and movable plateholders to repeat the images across the plate. In 1861 Southworth sold his patent rights to Simon Wing who, with Marcus Ormsby of Boston, manufactured a line of highly successful multiplying cameras. Eventually Wing's unique apparatus could be found in nearly every city and hamlet across America. His cameras with their "franchised" territories even turned up in foreign countries from Europe to Australia. A series of new designs in 1899 provided travelling photographers and boardwalk photo booths with "penny picture" cameras.

✧ By 1903 Simon turned over the operation of the Charlestown, Massachusetts factory to his son Harvey, who kept things going until around World War One when the company finally closed for good. In the later years of the company's operation, that camera business had fallen off and their main product was a line of photographers card mounts.

* On August 30, 1892, the *Boston Globe* reported that Harvey was now in charge of S. Wing & Company; the business was officially transferred to him in 1903, finally closing in 1937.

One obvious reason for the company's decline was the advent of roll film. Wing's cameras were designed for glass plates but the public was hooked on the lighter, more efficient film cameras. Harvey Wing, however, apparently felt that there was still a market for the right design; consequently on January 20, 1914, he was granted patent number 1,084,687 on a clever little glass plate camera. Just a little larger than the 4 X 5 glass plates it used, it was covered in black seal-grain leather with a tanned wood face which opened to reveal a miniature polished wood multiplying camera based on their popular "New Gem" penny picture camera of 1899. With its fixed focus lens and simple T.B.I. shutter, the camera could make nine images on each of the two plates in its holder. Eighteen photos from a light, handheld box was a much more manageable number than the 60 to 100 shots that came in the typical string-set Kodak.

Harvey constructed a prototype camera (a second but incomplete prototype was also found in the estate) to experiment with. In the only known photo taken with the camera we can see Harvey and his wife in a relaxed pose on the front porch of their Revere, Massachusetts home. The car shown in the other photos might have been the family car.

Why didn't Harvey go ahead and produce the camera? We will never know for sure but it may have been a case of too little too late. Also, it was an anachronistic design which was simply behind the times.



The prototype camera is compared here to Simon Wing's AJAX "Penny Picture" camera, a 5 X 7 plate camera first offered around 1900.

Remember, about this time a young German engineer, Oskar Barnak, was finishing his prototype "Leica", a precision camera far removed from Wing's Victorian mahogany and brass. Fifteen years earlier it might have kept the Simon Wing Company in the camera business. Just imagine, a simple adaptation to roll film and it might have been Wing, not Leitz who captured the small format market. As it is, we can only look at the prototype and sigh as we lament . . . this was the final Wing!

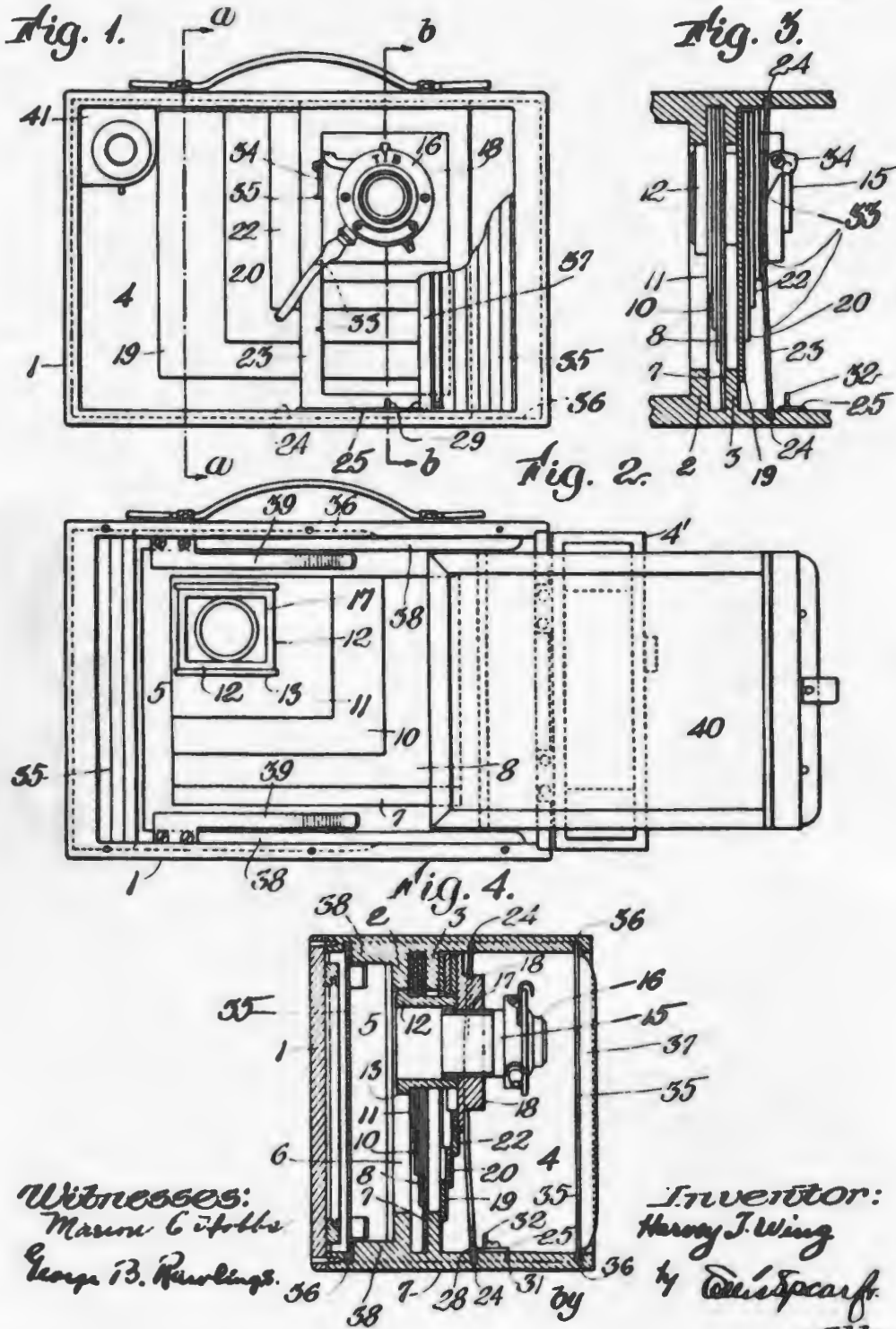
H. T. WING.
CAMERA.

APPLICATION FILED MAR. 10, 1913

Patented Jan. 20, 1914

3 SHEETS-SHEET 1.

1,084,687.



Witnesses:
Marion C. ...
George B. ...

Inventor:
Harry J. Wing
by ...
Atty.



The only known photo made by the prototype. Most of the images show a faint, circular flare, apparently a "bug" to be worked out of future models.



ABOVE: Harvey Wing and his wife on the front steps of their home in Revere, Massachusetts around 1913; enlarged from the photo above. LEFT: Typical Simon Wing multiplying camera of the 1860's and 1870's, much like the one that took the multiple image of Harvey Wing seen on the cover of this issue.