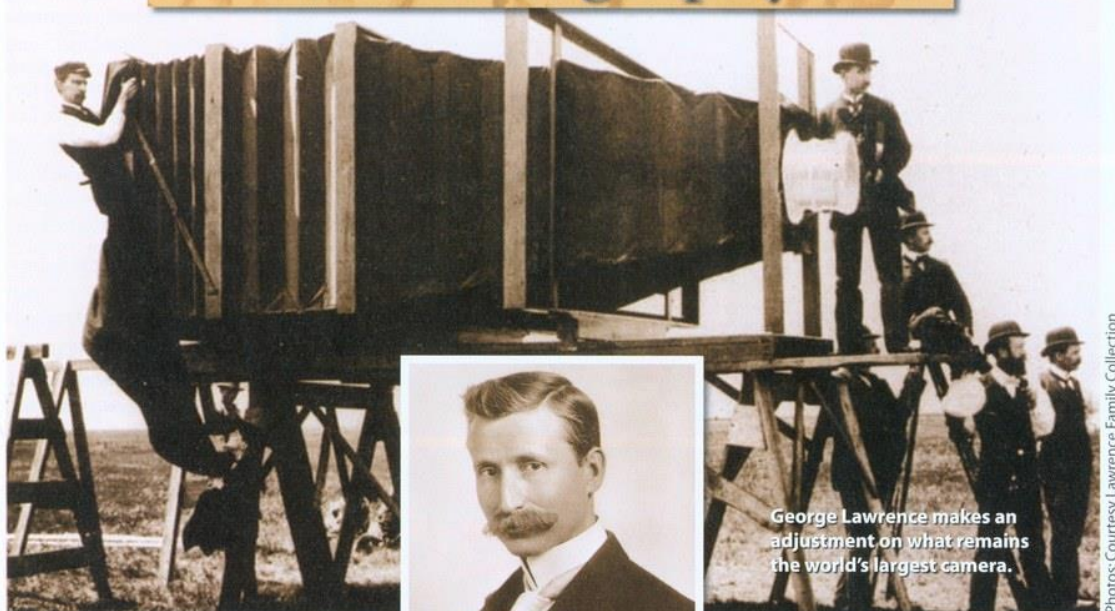


The Hitherto Impossible In Photography



George Lawrence makes an adjustment on what remains the world's largest camera.

Photos: Courtesy Lawrence Family Collection

Sometime during the last week of June in 1906—we don't know the precise date or time—a remarkably ingenious photographer from Chicago, George Raymond Lawrence, made his way along West Cliff Drive with an ornate apparatus in tow consisting of kites, cables, pulleys and a 50-pound camera that he had designed to take panoramic images from the air.

Lawrence was about to engage in what would be an historic moment in Santa Cruz County—one literally destined to be recorded for the ages—but it went virtually unnoticed, with not a single report of the actual event in either of community's two major newspapers, the *Morning Sentinel* or the *Daily Surf*.

A high, overhead marine layer covered the Central California coast that day—weather reports from the week indicate a typical summer-time pattern of morning fog clearing by early afternoon—one that stretched all the way to the ridge of the Santa Cruz Mountains and beyond.

The photographer and his five assistants assembled his apparatus and, when the wind was just right, sent his camera out



George R. Lawrence's stunning 1906 panoramic photograph of Santa Cruz County recorded an iconic moment in time.

over the bay, eventually to an altitude of more than 1,500 feet.

Lawrence was one of the country's most innovative photographic inventors at the turn of the 20th Century. He had fashioned the camera with a single celluloid plate approximately 20" x 48" and with curved shutters moving across the curved film plane, allowing for a panorama of 160 degrees. Using his levers and pulleys to control the cable, made out of piano wire and launched with a train of up to 17 Conyne kites, Lawrence positioned the camera perfectly, so that it was facing northeast, almost directly toward Loma Prieta.

By Geoffrey Dunn

The resulting panoramic image, bordered on the west by Monterey Street in the foreground and including the Cowell Ranch in the foothills overlooking the city, extends all the way east beyond Pleasure Point, and in the wide sweep includes what is now Seacliff State Beach and the foothills of Corralitos beyond. There is no other image with such scope and grandeur in the regional archive.

George R. Lawrence was born in northern Illinois, in 1868. He was a man of panoramic visions and even bigger dreams. At the age of 22, he moved to Chicago, and soon established The Lawrence Portrait Studio. Over the course of the next decade he developed innovations in "flashlight photography," for interior images, and panoramic devices for large cityscapes and sporting events. His company trumpeted the slogan: "The Hitherto Impossible in Photography is Our Specialty."

In 1900, he built what remains the world's largest camera, with an 8' x 4 1/2' glass-plate negative and weighing 1,400 pounds. One of his photographs from this



camera won the Grand Prize at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.

Lawrence soon became fascinated with aerial photography, often ascending to the heavens in hot-air balloons to secure his panoramic images. Twice he fell from heights of several hundred feet and miraculously escaped fatal injuries, saved by a matrix of telegraph and telephone wires that broke his fall on each occasion. As a

result, he switched from balloons to a kite-and-pulley apparatus he called The Captive Airship.

In the spring of 1906, Lawrence decided to come west to California to chronicle the Great Earthquake and Fire that had devastated the city of San Francisco on April 18. Lawrence saw an economic opportunity in the disaster, believing that there would be an international market for his

images. He was right. His famous panoramas of the San Francisco carnage netted him more than \$15,000.

It was originally assumed that Lawrence may have come to Santa Cruz a month later to document the burning of the Santa Cruz Boardwalk Casino, which took place on June 22, but a brief notice in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on Tuesday, June 19, dispelled that notion. In the paper's "Beach

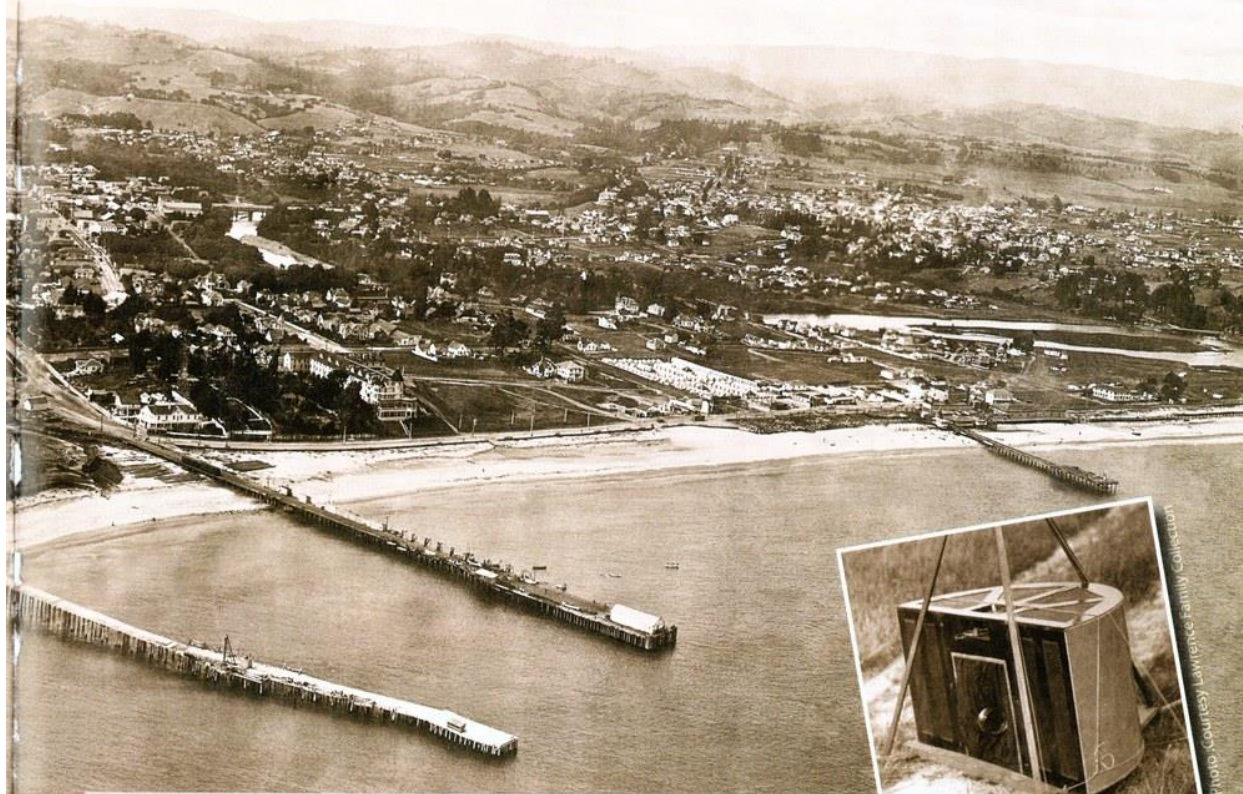


Photo: Courtesy Lawrence Family Collection

Breezes" column, the following notice occurred: "It was the intention to have a 'balloon photo' taken of the beach Sunday afternoon, but the air was too calm for the flying of the necessary kite, so the work must be postponed."

That would be the only mention of Lawrence's enterprise in the local media. Between the time of his first attempt and his successful effort a week or so later, a raging inferno destroyed the beachfront's famed casino, and thus the community's attentions turned elsewhere. Based on descriptions of the rebuilding process in both the dailies, the best guess is that the photo was taken after the debris was cleared from the beach on June 28 (or perhaps a few days earlier) and most certainly before the flooring was replaced on June 30.

There are no shadows discernable anywhere in the photo, so Lawrence had waited for the perfect lighting to execute his panorama. There are also horse-and-carriage activities noticeable on both Bay

Street and West Cliff Drive and an electric street car moving along Beach Street, but not a great deal of foot activity, so one can guess that the shot was taken some time in the early morning.

The details in the photo are nothing less than spectacular. With the benefit of modern-day, high resolution digital imagery, it's possible to obtain detailed close-ups of many of the structures, thoroughfares and natural environs in the county. You can zoom-in on the rooftop of the famed Sea Beach Hotel or downtown Santa Cruz or Woods Lagoon (now the Yacht Harbor) or Neary's Lagoon or one of the three wharves on the Santa Cruz waterfront in a way that brings the photo—and the moment in time it captures—vividly to life.

Lawrence also took similar photos that spring and summer in San Jose, Pacific Grove, Salinas, Pismo Beach, and Point Conception. Afterwards, Lawrence printed a copy of the Santa Cruz photograph and shipped it to the Library of Congress for

The panoramic camera used to photograph the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake and the coast of Santa Cruz.

copyright purposes. There, it was cut into four sections, so that it would fit neatly into a file drawer. The quartered image is the only original hard copy of the panorama known to be in existence. The original negative is also located in the Library of Congress as well.

As for the innovative Lawrence, he gave up on photography a short time later in 1910. After an extended journey to British East Africa, where he also took a series of aerial panoramas, he embarked on a successful second career in aviation design and invention. He died in 1938. ■

Special thanks to Stan Stevens, Barry Brown and Peter Nurske. A high-resolution of the 1906 Lawrence Santa Cruz panorama can be downloaded at the Library of Congress website.