1998

Spotlight-"Beyond the Maine"Sunset of Old Spanish Empire

Brenda Kean Tabor
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SUNSET OF OLD SPANISH EMPIRE

By Brenda Kean Tabor
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Charles Doty took this photograph of water carriers in La Habana.

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What do a well-known suffragette who was the first woman member of the U.S. Civil Service Commission and a little-known military photographer have in common? They both took photographs in the Caribbean and the Philippines shortly after the Spanish-American War; the photographs are now in the Natural History Museum’s National Anthropological Archives.

A selection of images by Helen Hamilton Gardener and Charles Edward Doty was recently compiled by NAA and the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives into a traveling exhibition, “Beyond the Maine: Imaging the New Empire,” the first exhibition for both offices.

This Hispanic Heritage Month exhibition coincides with the centenary of the Spanish-American War of 1898. The United States declared war on Spain on April 25, 1898, after the sinking of the Battleship Maine in Havana harbor on Feb. 15, 1898. The war ended with the Treaty of Paris on Dec. 10, 1898, which ended Spain’s control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam and other islands.

Gardener and Doty never met, but each visited the Caribbean and the Philippines soon after the hostilities of the Spanish-American War ended.

Gardener’s husband commanded U.S. troops in Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War, and he began their honeymoon by taking his bride to the scene of his triumphs. Gardener took along a camera, which she used to document life and social conditions she encountered as they traveled.

“This is an exceptional opportunity to view the old Spanish empire at its sunset, as it was seen by two contrasting American personalities of the age,” says Miguel Bretos, senior scholar at the Center for Latino Initiatives and one of the curators of the exhibition. “Doty and Gardener have left us a compelling testimony of people and places that became, and remain, part and parcel of the American experience.”

The spark of the exhibition began when National Anthropological Archives Director John Homiak came across a trove of Cuban photographs taken by Doty while delving into the Archives on a different project.

In 1996, many researchers, including Bretos, were looking for materials to use for projects commemorating the centenary of the Spanish-American War. “Doty’s glass plates, labeled ‘Cuba,’ jumped out at me,” Homiak says. When Bretos visited the Archives, Homiak pointed out the Doty materials to him. That summer, an undergraduate intern in Bretos’ office, José Salazar, examined the Doty holdings and produced a catalog.

“I was so fascinated by the beauty and importance of the materials,” Bretos says, “that I wrote an article, ‘Imaging Cuba Under the American Flag: Charles Edward Doty in Havana, 1899-1902,’ that appeared in the Cuba Theme Issue of the Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts.”

Meanwhile, Milagros Flores Roman, a historian with the National Park Service in San Juan, Puerto Rico, had also visited NAA in search of images from Puerto Rico. She was not only amazed by the wealth of resources available but also intrigued by Helen Gardener’s personality. With a grant from the Latino Initiatives Fund, the idea for an exhibition was born. Laura Larco, a Latin American specialist at NAA, undertook handling the logistics and curating the show with Bretos, Homiak and Roman. The exhibition was designed by John Coppola, former director of SI’s Office of Exhibits Central.

In 1996, Bretos introduced the exhibition team to Dora Valdés-Fauli, who directs Banco Santander International’s gallery in Miami, and an initial venue was secured. The bank generously offered to produce an exhibition brochure. The exhibition has since traveled to San Juan and Key West, Florida.

Doty’s sharply focused, beautifully composed photographs were printed from glass plates for the exhibition by Vic Krantz, now a volunteer, formerly a staffer, in the MNH Branch of Imaging, Printing and Photographic Services. The images by Gardener in the exhibition were printed by OIPPS Photographer Hugh Talman, under the supervision of OIPPS Deputy Director Lorie Acero.

Doty’s photographs meticulously document a wide variety of places and activities, ranging from before-and-after pictures of the area around La Punta Castle in Havana to the lowering of the U.S. flag over Morro Castle at Cuban independence in 1902, images of homeless “reconcentrados” and a demonstration of the use of the garrote, an infamous implement of capital punishment.

Doty left Cuba in 1902 and entered the Philippine civil service in 1904, where he worked for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing until 1920.